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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Guiding a Lost Saint with a Magical Revolution

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Prologue

"What? Wh-What did you just say, father?"

"I said that you needn't enroll in the Royal Academy, Stella."

I stood stock-still, at a loss for words. What did he mean? Why would he deny all my hard work now, mere months before the entrance exam?

"I realize that you've made an effort," my father, Duke Walter Howard, continued. He kept his gaze fixed out the window and gave no sign that he even noticed the look on my face. "You should have no difficulty passing the exam..."

"Then why deny me the chance?!"

"...But that's not enough." He pressed on, ignoring my outburst. "For generations, the royal family has trusted the Howards to defend the north. The head of our house must have martial prowess—they must be a master of the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf and of its complementary secret art, the Azure Fists."

"I understand," I said after a moment of strained silence.

My family, the Howards, oversaw one of only four duchies in our kingdom. The Four Great Dukedoms of the north, east, south, and west each held vast territories. In times of trouble, they were duty bound to serve as the kingdom's sword and shield, and they had upheld that duty over the two centuries since the War of the Dark Lord.

Each ducal house demonstrated exceptional prowess using a particular type of weapon—bare hands in the north, axes in the east, swords in the south, and spears in the west. For generations, each had passed down a supreme spell and secret art with which they had saved the kingdom on countless occasions.

Blizzard Wolf and the Azure Fists.

Lightning Lord Tiger and the Violet Axe.

Firebird and the Scarlet Sword.

Gale Dragon and the Emerald Spear.

Their power, which outstripped all other spells and techniques, had even won renown abroad. And yet...

"I may lack the mana to activate a supreme spell or emulate the Azure Fists," I said with emphasis, "but with more study, I'm certain that will change!"

"The quantity of one's mana is largely determined at birth," my father replied. "It has been known to increase with maturity...but not often. Magical control depends in large part on talent as well. An intelligent girl like you must know that."

I had no response.

"Stella." My father turned to face me, kindness and resignation in his eyes.

Oh. I'm about to receive a cruel pronouncement.

"Stop," he told me. "You've done enough. At present, I am the only member of our house who has mastered supreme magic. No one else even possesses the potential to do so. You lack the mana, and while Tina's mana is great..." He slowly shook his head and then walked over to where I stood frozen. There, he lay one of his massive hands on my left shoulder. "As a military family, the Ducal House of Howard may end with me. Even so, we bear great obligations to the kingdom. I want you to seek out a new era for our house."

It took me a moment to respond. "I understand your reasoning," I said at length, "but that's all the more reason why I should enroll in the Royal Academy! As the future Duchess Howard, is it not my duty to improve myself there and then go on to further studies at the university?"

"You needn't insist on that," he replied. "Even if you don't go to the royal capital, I can summon the finest—"

"I refuse!" Before I knew what I was doing, I was shouting, and I couldn't stop. "I can't blame you for not seeing me as a trustworthy successor. But if mother believed in me, I can believe in myself! I'll earn my place in the Royal Academy and then the university, and I'll show you that I have what it takes to be a worthy duchess!"

"Stella. Stop," my father reiterated. "It's hopeless."

"Excuse me," I replied coldly after a brief silence and then made for the door.

"There's no chance that you'll ever master Blizzard Wolf or the Azure Fists!" came his heartbroken shout from behind me. "It won't make a difference where you study!" He paused for a moment and then continued in a calmer tone. "There's also Tina to consider. You must have heard what people call her. If you go to the royal capital... Not all nobles are noble by nature. Please, do as I ask."

I closed the door without a word. My father was still calling to me, but I didn't look back. Ahead of me now was not a corridor, but a deep expanse of darkness.

I didn't regret my decision to run away—to flee the mansion with only my mother's ribbon and her favorite sword and wand to apply to the Royal Academy. I refused to regret it. It had been my choice to make.

"You're always so quick to put a bold face on things," spoke a voice in the darkness. It had come from...me? A younger me, shorter in both hair and stature.

What? I *had* passed the Royal Academy entrance exam, hadn't I? My performance at the time had been far from outstanding, but I had worked tirelessly and even managed to become president of the student council. My head was in a whirl. I was uncertain of the sequence of events.

Oh, I see. This... This is a dream.

"Really? Is that so?" the other me asked, giggling. "Am I sure I don't regret it?"

I'm sure.

"Liar."

It's the truth!

"It's a lie. I'm lying."

I am doing no such thing.

"Who became jealous of Caren's talent after meeting her at the Royal Academy? And who then lost hope?"

I'm neither jealous nor hopeless! Caren is amazing, but I've been working hard to catch up to her!

"But I'm certain that I'll never be able to. I keep thinking that I'll never be a match for her anyway, that I'm just not as talented as she is, that there's nothing I can do about it. I've given up."

Th-That's...

I was shaken. It was true that I had worked hard, but Caren, my best friend, was bursting with talent and had worked harder than anyone. Harder than I had.

"See? I knew it. That's why I was able to surpass you so easily, Stella."

The figure transformed into my younger sister, who had once been totally incapable of spellcasting. I retreated one step and then another as “Tina” advanced the same distance.

“Tell me,” she said, “how does it feel to be suddenly outstripped by your magically impaired little sister—the one people called ‘the Howards’ cursed child’? You felt so secure, didn’t you, Stella? As long as I couldn’t cast a single spell, there was no question that you would inherit the dukedom.”

No! No! No*! Tina wouldn’t say that! My little sister learning to use magic made me glad—*

“And also intensely jealous.”

I covered my face with my hands and sank to the ground. I *was* jealous. I had cursed them—not only Caren, but everyone who had been there to face Prince Gerard. Tina, who had easily mastered Blizzard Wolf, a spell that I had not even begun to grasp. Ellie, who had defeated the prince’s followers one after another with the overwhelming silence and precision of her spellcasting. Lynne, who had learned not only swordplay, but Firebird, the symbol of the Leinsters. And...the pair that I had idolized for so long—Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and Mr. Allen. The tales of their numerous deeds must have been exaggerated—or so I had believed. But they were all true. In fact, the rumors hadn’t done them justice; they were like something out of a fairy tale.

One day, when I succeeded to the Duchy of Howard, the Ducal House of Leinster would have Lady Lydia—and Mr. Allen alongside her, assuming they managed to overcome the class division between a great noble and a commoner. The two of them had vanquished what I took to be the secret magic of the royal family—the great spell Radiant Shield, which my mother had once told me of. I couldn’t even cast a supreme spell. I would be no match for them.

Why...? Why wasn’t it me? Why did it have to be Tina who met Mr. Allen?

“I met him, not you. It serves you right. After all...” The figure of my sister returned to being my younger self. “I ran away from home. I didn’t try to catch up to Caren. I didn’t fight alongside Tina, Ellie, and Lynne. I didn’t call for help afterward.”

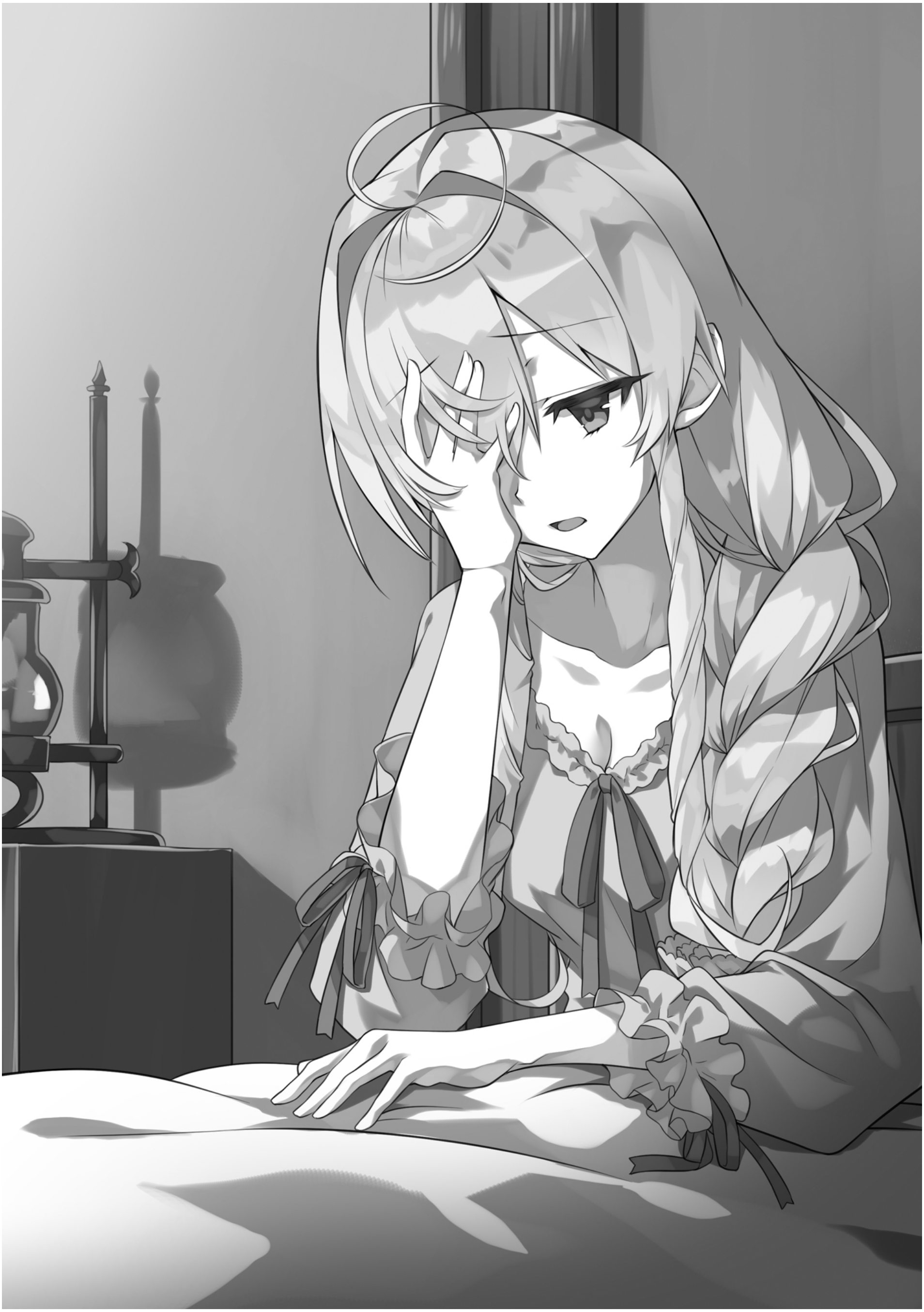
I was furious with myself—with this other me—but she seized my hands and forced me to look her in the eyes.

“It was all my choice,” she continued. “I ran away. I *chose* to run away, even though I was so determined not to when I left for the royal capital. No one in the world expects anything from me now. Poor me. But I couldn’t help it—that’s who Stella Howard is.

I'm weak, I'm cowardly, and I can't make up my mind about anything on my own."

*

"You're wrong!" I shouted as I bolted awake, then covered my mouth and looked around me in surprise.



Faint moonlight filtered through the curtains of a room that held three beds, including mine. The bed nearest the window was empty.

This is...the Royal Academy dormitory.

It appeared that I had avoided waking Caren, who was sleeping in the bed next to mine.

Intense feelings of guilt assailed me. Tina wasn't like that at all, but I...

"It's fine," I told myself. "Everything's going to be all right, Stella. I just need to proceed at my own pace. Isn't that how I've always done things?" I paused and then repeated, "Everything's going to be all right. I just have to keep trying."

I closed my eyes and waited for my agitation to subside. I needed to get to sleep soon; I had class the next day, and the final exams of the first semester were right around the corner. And yet, sleep eluded me.

It wasn't the first time in recent memory that I had started awake out of similar nightmares. I didn't believe that I harbored such twisted feelings toward Tina, her friends, Lady Lydia, or Mr. Allen—my dreams were no more than that. My student council work had been piling up, so I must have been more tired than I realized. I would have to work harder. My other roommate, who had taken a leave of absence for medical reasons, would be back the week after next, and she would worry unless I got a firm grip on myself.

I carefully got out of bed and walked to the entrance. A long time ago, my mother had stroked my young head and told me, "On nights when you can't sleep, be very quiet and watch the moon and stars. I'm sure that you..." I couldn't remember the rest; only how kind her voice had been. This had become my secret custom ever since.

"I haven't grown up at all, have I?" I muttered, mocking myself as I opened the door and stepped out into a profoundly silent corridor.

*

Once Stella had quietly closed the door, I opened my eyes. How many times did this make since that commotion with Prince Gerard?

“What’s gotten into her?” I wondered aloud.

Stella was strong and earnest—that was why she worried so much about her ducal house, her sister, herself...and me and my brother Allen.

“Should I force her to talk? No. Once Felicia gets back, I’ll... Or should I ask Allen to...?”

My train of thought had reached a dead end, and I went another night without arriving at an answer. Before long, I sank back into a deep sleep.

Chapter 1

"Y'know, Allen, I've been thinking—are you one of those people who goes out of their way to bring trouble on themselves? Do you go around asking, 'How much for a whole heap?'"

I stopped leafing through papers to glare across the desk at the man who had once been my university underclassman. He cut a dashing figure sitting on the visitors' couch, but the mocking look he was giving me spoiled the effect.

We haven't seen each other in half a year, and this is how he acts?

"Tell me," I said at length, "do I really look like the kind of person who would do that?"

"Totally!" my tall friend affirmed. "You wouldn't be doing this otherwise, even though it's not a long-term thing. I mean, tutoring the daughters of Duke Leinster and Duke Howard, plus the granddaughter of those northern big shots the Walkers, *and* screening business partners for both ducal houses' experiment in selling produce, wine, and a bunch of other new goods to the capital? And I know you've gotta help out the boss—Lydia—on top of that. Speaking of which, I get the tutoring gig, but why are *you* screening businesses?" He paused briefly and then exclaimed, "Oh! Have you finally decided to make it big?!" His eyes sparkled with excitement.

"I have not," I corrected him, forcing a smile. "I'm told that both ducal houses have been planning to establish joint business contacts in the capital for some time, but they had called the plan off due to a lack of resources on the Howards' part. Then, recently, the Howards succeeded in increasing their production of new crops. Both houses quickly agreed to an experimental enterprise, but now the issue is that neither can spare personnel to manage the operation in the capital. Their duchies are so large that they're always shorthanded. Doesn't that go for your own house too? But yes, the responsibility just ended up devolving to me. That said..." I paused for a moment. "The professor and the headmaster of the Royal Academy knew about this before I did. The professor is firm friends with Their Highnesses, Duke Walter Howard and Duke Liam Leinster, and Duchess Lisa Leinster is a former student of his... No. I'm just overthinking things."

"Oh, so you just got set up."

I was trying to avoid saying that out loud.

"The nerve of you," I said sarcastically, pressing a hand to my forehead. "If you've got time on your hands, help me check these documents—or would you prefer I adopt a more respectful tone, Your Highness, Lord Gil Algren? Would you be so gracious as to assist this hopeless incompetent? Or would Your Highness prefer the title 'leading contender to be the next Duke Algren'?"

Indeed, Gil Algren—this tall, annoyingly good-looking young man in sorcerer's garb sporting longish, light-blond hair with a pale violet streak at the front—was properly styled "His Highness." My native kingdom was home to four ducal houses, each of which controlled a vast territory in one of the four cardinal directions. Due to the role these houses had played in the kingdom's founding and their historical blood-ties to the royal family, the dukes and their children were accorded the honorable form of address.

The Ducal House of Algren were the chief nobles in the east of the kingdom, including the eastern capital, which my family called home. Gil was Duke Algren's fourth son and youngest child. He was a year younger than Lydia and I, and while he could come off as thoughtless, he had earned a reputation for himself at the Royal University, the kingdom's foremost institute of learning.

Gil wasn't a graduate of the Royal Academy, but he had been hailed as "the second coming of the first Duke Algren" at his school in the eastern capital, where he had skipped several years to enroll in the university at a mere fourteen years of age. He had been close with the albatross and me ever since. Gil was also beloved by his much older father, and some even speculated that he would inherit the dukedom.

"G-Give it a rest!" my former underclassman pleaded, moving his whole body in a gesture of refusal. "I'm illegitimate, remember?! I didn't even go to the Royal Academy!" He paused briefly and then added, "When you talk to me like that..."

"Yes?"

"I can only picture a future where I'd be better off dead," Gil finished. "Don't you care about your old schoolmate?!"

"Not about one who mocks me but never Lydia," I replied.

"He's as bad as the professor and deserves the same treatment."

"You could at least say I'm better than the professor!" he pleaded. "Besides, you know the boss'd kill me if I messed with her. I'm not you, so don't ask me to put my head on the chopping block like that! You've got no common sense."

I slumped back in my chair and gazed at the ceiling. *So, people have finally decided that I lack common sense because of her. How depressing. I ought to get this work over with quickly and call on my dear students to ease my mind. That's just what I'll do.*

"But you've been that way all the time I've known you, sir," Tina would say. "You're amazing!"

"Um, well..." Ellie would timidly add. "Y-You shouldn't let it get to you, Allen, sir."

"Such words don't suit you, dear brother!" Lynne would conclude. "You've always been anything but common."

How odd... I couldn't picture them coming to my defense. It had been three months since they enrolled in the Royal Academy, and it seemed to me that they were steadily losing their reserve. I knew that I was the one who had told Tina that she didn't need to "show any restraint or keep anything bottled up," but still.

"You have it all wrong, Young Master Gil!" interjected the slender, chestnut-haired woman tidying up a heap of papers on the desk beside mine. She was Anna, the Leinsters' head maid. "To the two of them, it amounts to a tryst! With sufficient experience, an observer could surely grasp their meaning! But when a veteran of the Leinster Maid Corps, firm of purpose, did decipher it..." Anna paused for effect. "The sickly sweetness of their romance fairly turned her stomach and resulted in a great number of addicts. The single among us beat the ground with their fists and cried themselves to sleep night after night. I urge you not to approach the study lightly!"

"The girls in our department published the same info!" Gil exclaimed, looking notably surprised. "You've opened my eyes."

"Think nothing of it," Anna crowed in reply.

"Anna, these are the ones I'm done with," I said after a moment of silence, using a levitation spell to pass the stack of documents I had reached a decision on to the head maid. "The Fosse Company is the last interview candidate. I'd like you to review a few points that caught my eye."

Gil gave me a look for some reason, as did Anna when she received the documents. What for?

“See that?” my former underclassman asked.

“Yes, I most certainly did,” the head maid replied.

“No normal sorcerer uses levitation spells like that!” they exclaimed in unison.

“You can do that, can’t you, Anna?” I protested. “And you just don’t practice, Gil.”

“What?! Not a chance!” came two responses. They were in perfect sync despite how little they likely saw of each other. I would need to watch out for that.

“Hmm...” Anna began checking the documents with more than human speed.

“I’ve done my best to choose partners that both ducal houses could do business with without issue,” I explained. “I’ve included my personal opinion with the documents on each business.”

“Mr. Allen,” Anna said.

“Yes?”

I had based my judgments on my experience and the documents, but perhaps my verdicts were unsatisfactory.

“Simply flawless!” the head maid exclaimed as she produced an envelope from a drawer, slipped the documents inside, and sealed it. “I shall report as much to my master and His Highness, Duke Howard. I would expect no less from the gentleman who managed Lady Lydia’s purse and routine duties more than perfectly during his student days!”

“I based my judgments on two criteria—trustworthiness and availability for long-term partnerships.” I concluded my explanation after a pause, ignoring Anna’s effusion.

“Quite reasonable!” she chirped. “I shall deliver these to my mistress at once! You have my sincere gratitude for taking the time to assist us.”

“Don’t mention it; I had mornings free. Please give Duchess Lisa Leinster—”

“Oh? Would you please repeat that, Mr. Allen?” Anna interrupted me, her tone even more affected than usual. “I seem to have suddenly become hard of hearing.”

“Please give...Lisa my regards,” I said, correcting myself.

Anna giggled. “Depend upon it!” she proclaimed. “Today is Iceday, and you will begin teaching at the Leinster mansion this afternoon. I plan to assist you from tomorrow onward. Lady Lydia and Lady Lynne were full of praise for the service they received at the Howard residence after they returned last week." The head maid paused and then burst out, "We won't let our competitors best us! No, we most certainly will not! We may be pitted against Mrs. Shelley Walker, that renowned maid of legend, but the word 'defeat' doesn't exist in the Leinster Maid Corps's dictionary! On my honor, we shall endeavor to provide satisfaction!"

I forced an awkward chuckle.

"Excuse me!" Anna performed a flawless salute and then vanished from sight. She was as mysterious as ever.

I checked my pocket watch. *Oh no. I'm going to be late for my appointment.*

After tidying up my desk, I rose to my feet. "Gil," I said, "I'm going out. Don't you have lectures to attend this afternoon?"

"Sure do," my former underclassman replied, following me out of the room.

This reminds me of my university days. I seem to recall Lydia and our underclassmen chasing me around wherever I went.

"How's the university?" I asked as we entered a corridor and made our way to the exit of the building.

"Boring," he replied. "It's been quiet since you and the boss graduated."

"You make it sound like we were the only ones at the center of all the commotion," I said after a pause. "Give it a rest. There are Howard maids here too, and you wouldn't want them to think that I was involved in *everything* she got up to."

"Huh? Weren't you?" Gil gave me a bewildered stare.

He doesn't even doubt it?! Well, he's right when it comes to the past four years...

"I'm glad I came," Gil said. "I cleared up a question that's been bugging me for years now."

"What question was that?"

"Our kingdom's renowned Lady of the Sword has racked up more accomplishments and feats of daring than I can count," he explained. "She must've won herself a fortune on top of all that fame. But you know how the boss is, so I wondered how she kept track of it all. I figured she would've wasted it on— Allen."

"Hm? Go on," I pressed him. "Keep talking."

"F-Fat chance!" Gil stammered. "What're you holding that video orb for?! What're you planning to do with it?!"

“I’m going to show it to Lydia,” I told him. “When she visits the university...” I let my words trail off and then added, “Don’t die on me, Gil.”

“H-Have a heart, man!” he protested. “I know you love the boss so much that you beat Prince Gerard to a pulp and ditched your dream of being a court sorcerer just ’cause he insulted her, but that’s no excuse to sell out your—”

“Your Highness, Lord Gil Algren,” I said, clamping a hand over my garrulous former underclassman’s mouth, “I think you’ve said quite enough. Don’t you?”

And she wasn’t the only *reason.*

I bowed slightly to a Howard maid and a Leinster maid—distinguished by the azure and scarlet stripes on their respective uniforms—who just happened to pass us at that moment. They responded with refined chuckles. Perhaps they had overheard us.

Ugh.

Gil was now tapping my hand, so I released him. “What’s the big deal?” he asked after gasping for air. “More people know than don’t. Same goes for that mess at the Royal Academy. There’s no stopping rumors with that many witnesses in broad daylight, even when the royal family’s involved.”

“Aah!” I shouted, trying to drown him out. “I haven’t done anything! That was just an accident! And I don’t know anything about any ‘mess at the Royal Academy’!”

“I hear you were in a tight spot when the boss swooped in to save you,” Gil continued. “The girls wouldn’t stop talking about it!”

I groaned. He was taking every opportunity to rub salt in my wounds. The professor’s students were vicious!

We both fell silent for a moment, and then Gil muttered, “I meant it when I said it’s boring. You never even visit.”

“I do,” I replied, confused. “I drop by two or three times a week.”

“Whaaat?!” Gil exclaimed. “B-But I’ve never seen you around!”

“I’d guess that’s because the professor told me to use his office when he’s not busy.”

“I’m gonna convene a student trial right away,” Gil announced after a moment of stunned silence. I liked the look on his face, and I would spare nothing in supporting him. I was hardly an uninterested party myself.

Heh heh... Don’t you think it’s high time you settled down, *Professor?*

"Wh-Whoa," Gil stammered. "You're seriously twisted. Then again..."

"Hm?"

"You've got it rough too." A beat later, he added, "You're gonna work yourself to death, you know? If the boss is gonna abduct you for some time off, it's now or never."

"Regardless of whatever's going on behind the scenes," I argued, "this was a personal request from both dukes and Duchess Lisa. Could *you* turn them down?"

"No way..." Gil admitted.

"Right? The screening will take a month and a half at most, and the interviews the week after next should be the end of it. Someone important will take charge of the business once it starts up in earnest next spring."

"I hope you're right," Gil replied after a pause.

"I've got my hands full with tutoring."

A week in the kingdom consisted of eight days named for the eight classical elements—fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, light, and darkness—in accordance with the Unified Continental Calendar. Customarily, Lightday was a day of worship and Darknessday a day of rest; most people had both off.

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne spent their weekdays—from Fireday through Iceday noon—at the Royal Academy. As a result, our tutoring sessions began Iceday afternoon and ended Darknessday night. Their location rotated between the Howard and Leinster mansions on a weekly basis, and as Anna's enthusiasm had indicated, I would be tutoring at the Leinster mansion that week.

I spent the beginning of my week—Fireday through Windday—on my temporary job screening potential business partners. I had Lightningday and Iceday morning off, but I also had to prepare my lessons, deal with visits from Lydia, and call on the headmaster in relation to the great spells and that diary. I spent weekday nights preparing notes for the girls and hunting through books. My search was currently focused on documents roughly a century old that might contain records of the great spell Radiant Shield going out of control, but I hadn't yet had any luck. There were no accounts of the incident, and there were traces of an organized effort to suppress information. In the worst case, records might survive only in the palace archives. The thought made my head ache. That had been my weekly schedule for the past month and a half.

He's right... I'd say I have been working a lot. I wonder how things ended up this way?

"I've heard rumors, but is it true that your students are no joke?" Gil asked, interrupting my musings about the position I found myself in.

"They're improving at an astounding rate," I confirmed. "I can't wait to see what they'll do next."

"You sound happy," he remarked.

"I am. They're poised to surpass me in no time."

"Surpass *you*?" Gil repeated, incredulous. "Are you serious? That's beyond impossible. Besides, I'd say your students have their hearts set less on surpassing you and more on— Actually, never mind. I'm impressed that they've even got the guts to challenge the unbeatable Lady of the Sword. But y'know..."

As the exit came into view, Gil stopped walking, stood up straight, and looked at me. "This last incident has made your name known throughout the kingdom and beyond," he said with an abrupt change of tone. "That fool, Prince Gerard, has been placed in my house's custody and sentenced to indefinite house arrest and suspension from duty. Most of his allies in the aristocracy received heavy sentences as well. On the other hand, you and your students got off scot-free, while the boss received an irregular promotion to the princess's personal guard. The conservatives who have been loudly protesting meritocracy are gritting their teeth and calling you a 'bringer of calamity.' The leader of the court sorcerers, Gerhard Gardner, is holding his peace...but there are still people trying to make contact with Gerard during his arrest. It seems like both the Algren secret service and the royal guard are pursuing secret investigations as well. Don't let your guard down."

He had probably made this visit just to deliver that warning. My former underclassman was a good man, although I wished that he would act like this more of the time. His excuse for not changing his manner at the university—that it would be "too embarrassing after all this time"—was hardly convincing.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll take care. Let's have a nice, long talk again sometime."

"Sure thing."

*

The western avenue of the royal capital was home to many cafés, each with a roof of a different color. The roof of our favorite was sky blue. I had read in some book or other that the cafés had multiplied to meet demand from the many nearby educational institutions—most notably the Royal Academy. I often spotted students slipping out of school to enjoy lunch here, so that explanation was very possibly correct.

Early summer was beginning to make its presence felt, and the air was bracing. Sitting outside had been the right choice. I was going over my plans for the afternoon's lesson with a coffee cup in one hand when I heard several sounds racing energetically toward me.

"Allen, sir!"

"Dear brother!"

Two girls in berets and short-sleeved blazers shouted with joy the instant they caught sight of me. The blonde was Ellie Walker, heir to the Walker family, supporters of the northern Ducal House of Howard. She was also personal maid to Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard. The redhead was Her Highness, Lady Lynne Leinster, the second daughter of Duke and Duchess Leinster. That made her the younger sister of Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword and the albatross around my neck. I had seen them like this dozens of times before, but I was still struck by how well the Royal Academy's stylish summer uniforms became them. The girls approached me without slowing down and took the seats on either side of mine.

Ellie giggled. "Th-That was my third straight victory."

"I did it," Lynne declared. "I beat her here this week."

"Please take your time, you two," I warned them. "You wouldn't want to trip and fall."

"Yes, sir," they cheerfully chorused back.

Good.

"What happened to Tina?" I asked them after ordering three fruit-infused ice waters from a familiar waitress. Both girls looked away in silence. I would expect that from Lynne, but Ellie too?

A moment later, the sound of stamping feet was followed by a massive wave of mana and cold. There stood a petite, uniformed girl with a snow-white ribbon in her faintly blue-tinged platinum hair. She smiled wordlessly, holding her rod at the ready, as countless snowflakes filled the air around us. She had already deployed elementary ice spells and could activate them at a moment's notice. Her targets were Ellie and Lynne.

This was Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard. A mere half a year prior, she had been unable to cast a single spell despite her vast store of mana. This young noblewoman had also provided both the impetus for my career as a private tutor and my reason for continuing it.

Her attacks were normally meant partly in good fun. On closer inspection, however, I noticed that there were leaves clinging to her uniform in places and that her hair was disheveled.

Ellie and Lynne moved their chairs behind me.

Well now.

"Tina," I said, "please lower your rod."

"Sir, please stand aside," she replied after a pause. A lock of her bangs was standing straight up. "I'm going to give the pair of them a taste of how I feel!"

I shot a glance behind me. What had these girls done?

"L-Lady Tina," Ellie protested, poking her head out from behind my back, "I d-don't think that trying to cut ahead of us was very fair of you."

"That's right," Lynne added, poking her head out as well. "Dear brother, Miss First Place tried to leave for lunch without telling us because she wanted to sit next to you."

Tina was momentarily at a loss for a retort. "That doesn't justify the two of you ganging up to set a wind magic trap!" the young noblewoman finally argued, shaking her rod.

It sounds as though they got a little carried away. What good friends they are, I thought, failing to suppress a laugh.

"Sir..." Tina responded, puffing up her cheeks with indignation.

I didn't really mean to make her pout. "Tina," I gently called to her, reaching into my bag and removing the comb that the albatross forced me to carry around.

"Wh-What?" she asked. "I-I refuse to stay my wrath, even for you, sir."

"I'll fix your hair for you," I said. "Please come over here."

That appeared to get Tina's attention. "If you insist," she eventually responded.

"I do insist," I replied. "Please?"

Tina silently lowered her rod and dismissed her spells. She then speedily approached me, secured a chair, and moved it so that she was sitting with her back to me. Her arms were crossed, and her cheeks were still puffed up—she was apparently determined to maintain her irate posture, although that lock of her bangs was swaying happily.

“Please don’t get the wrong idea,” she said. “I haven’t forgiven the two of them for—”

Tina’s words gave way to a startled exclamation of delight as I removed her beret and cast a spell that enveloped her in a warm breeze, blowing the leaves from her uniform. I then conjured just a few drops of water and set about carefully combing out her windblown hair.

"Ellie. Lynne," I called to the other two girls, who were peering at us, once Tina had fallen silent.

"Y-Yessir," Ellie responded.

"Yes?" Lynne added at almost the same time.

"Don't overdo it," I chided them.

Ellie groaned, obviously flustered.

"D-Dear brotheeer," Lynne protested.

Tina laughed triumphantly. "That's right," she said. "I'm the victim here. That makes this my natural right."

"That goes for you too, Tina," I told her. "Good little girls don't run around town deploying spells."

"S-Siiir..." she said in apparent surprise.

"All three of you: what should you do when you've done something wrong or crossed a line?" I prompted them.

"We're sorry," all three answered sheepishly. I was glad that my students were such upstanding girls, although I decided to have them work on correcting their occasional excesses in future.

"Well said," I told them. "Now, once you've finished your drinks, we'll head to the Leinster mansion. And no cake—Anna will be upset if you spoil your appetites for lunch."

*

When the weather was good, I held my lessons in the inner courtyards of the ducal residences. It was a pleasant time of year, and there was nothing to stop me imparting my knowledge outdoors, rain and wind permitting.

The problem was practical exercises—the two daughters of dukes packed too much power in their spells for indoor casting. It caused problems, and the stress of breaking costly furniture and household goods every lesson threatened to give me stomach pain. The solution was simply to have them do it outside; I was lucky that both ducal houses maintained vast gardens at their residences in the royal capital. The headmaster had refused to let us use the Royal Academy's practical testing ground, groaning that the idea recalled his nightmares of the entrance exams. To be fair to him, I wouldn't put it past Tina and Lynne to blow the venue sky-high.

The girls stood before me in their casual wear, working magic for all they were worth. Tina was controlling a blizzard within a military-grade ice-resistant barrier, while Lynne did the same with an inferno within a barrier she had erected herself. They were using intermediate spell formulae, but the resulting force rivaled an advanced spell. I shuddered to think what that portended.

“Tina,” I called, “you’re wasting mana. Try to remain conscious of your spell’s power.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” the platinum-haired girl replied.

“Lynne, your barrier is coming apart in several places. Mind the details. I see you’ve improved considerably.”

“Right!” the redhead answered. She then taunted Tina with a derisive, “Hah.”

“Lyyynne!” Tina took her bait and looked away from her blizzard, which grew in power as cracks formed in the ice-resistant barrier. I would have liked to let them keep going a little longer, but needs must. I intervened and dismantled the spells, bringing shocked looks to both girls’ faces.

“How many times must I tell you that you’re not allowed to play around while handling magic?” I scolded them. “I’m glad that you’re such good friends, but consider the time and the place.”

“We were not ‘playing,’ and we are not friends!” the pair protested in perfect unison.

“Let’s take a break,” I suggested after a pause. “You’ve been practicing nonstop since you finished lunch.”

I mean, really. I know that neither one of them has ever had a friend her own age before, and I understand why they get so hung up on each other, but I wish they would learn some restraint. Hey, don’t fight with your bangs like—

A tug on my left sleeve derailed my train of thought. It was Ellie, who, unlike the other girls, was wearing her school uniform.

“A-Allen, sir,” she said, “p-please wash me too.” A moment later, she let out a little gasp of embarrassment when she realized she had misspoken.

“You’re right,” I replied. “Excuse me, is anyone about?”

“At your service,” a dignified maid with dark-brown hair answered, appearing without a sound. Her name was Emma, and she had once told me that she had southern ancestry on her mother’s side. She was followed by a group of maids pushing a cart. It appeared that they were fully prepared.

“Tea for Tina and Lynne, please,” I said to Emma.

"Sir!" Tina protested.

"Dear brother!" Lynne joined her.

"Certainly, sir," Emma replied. "Today's tea is a calming herbal blend."

"Thank you very much," I said. "Ellie."

"Y-Yessir," Ellie answered.

"Those two have turned delinquent and won't listen to me."

"I-I'm a good girl, sir," Ellie stammered.

"I'm glad to hear it. In that case, let's practice together."

"Y-Yessir!" the bashful angel replied and then giggled. How soothing.

"Humph!" one of my delinquent students fumed. "You're always like that, sir."

"Dear brother," the other added, "I've mended my ways. Let me join you."

"Both of you, please be seated," Emma commanded. After a brief silence, she added, "Otherwise I'll show Mr. Allen the recording of your sleepover the week before last."

That appeared to startle Tina and Lynne, who quickly seated themselves properly in chairs as far apart from each other as they could manage. Emma certainly knew how to handle them—it was no wonder that Anna had recommended her. She was, by her own account, ranked fourth in the Society for Watching Over Lady Lydia and Lady Lynne in Public and Private. Part of me was curious to meet the two members I had yet to encounter, and another part of me hoped not to.

I nodded to Emma, and she quickly completed her preparations before withdrawing with a smile. She realized that there were matters we couldn't discuss in her presence and was being considerate.

"Now," I prompted Ellie, "why don't you show me how well you can control the force of your spells and cast within a barrier?"

"Y-Yessir." The maid in a school uniform waved her hands with a look of nervous tension on her face. And then... "H-How did I do?"

"Wonderfully," I replied.

Tina and Lynne maintained a stony silence. Ellie had activated an intermediate wind spell within a barrier roughly the size of a wooden box for storing wine. When it came to fine control, she was several cuts above the other two girls.

"A-Allen, sir, I'd like a h-head rub," she requested, removing her beret and taking half a step toward me.

I'm trying to mend that bad habit of mine...but what choice do I have?

"You're amazing, Ellie," I told the happy maid as I gently stroked her head.

Tina and Lynne sprang to their feet with a clatter, slamming both hands on the table.

"Sir!"

"Dear brother!"

"Young ladies, your tea will get cold," I chided them. "Please sit down."

"Oh, you're so mean, sir!" Tina fumed at me.

"You're so mean, dear brother," Lynne echoed.

The pair returned to their seats and began drinking the herbal tea that Emma had brewed for them while snacking on pastries with jam. I wondered if they would leave some for us.

Ellie had just about mastered force control and casting within a barrier. In which case...

"Ellie, what would you like to learn next?" I asked.

"Um, well," she stammered, "I-I'd like to learn advanced magic."

"Advanced magic?" I repeated thoughtfully.

Ellie was capable of using six of the eight classical elements—fire, water, earth, wind, ice, and darkness. She struggled with lightning and light, but that was still a noteworthy achievement considering that most sorcerers could only command a single element. Because she had prioritized elementary and intermediate magic, however, she had yet to learn an advanced spell.

"I can teach you the spell formulae, but I lack the mana to show you an example," I apologized, crouching down to look Ellie in the eyes. "I'll ask Tina or Lynne to help you."

"A-Allen, sir." The maid blushed, brought her hands together over her chest, and stared at me. "I-I think that you could do it if you l-linked mana with me!"

I should have seen that coming...

"Linking mana" was just what it sounded like—the ability to connect another person's mana with my own. Doing so granted me the ability to use that person's mana, although linking too deeply had the unfortunate side effect of rendering us unable to conceal our emotions from each other. Thus far, I had linked with the albatross—Lydia—my younger sister Caren, and Tina. In all three cases, I had done it in response to an emergency that left me no alternative.

This called for a polite refusal.

"I sincerely appreciate the sentiment," I told Ellie, "but I must do so sparingly. I'm confident that you'll learn to cast the spells even without my example to follow."

"Wh-When you're in trouble, like you were the other day," Ellie stammered, "I w-want to help you, A-Allen, sir!"

Two months previously, I had battled Gerard—the second prince of the kingdom, with whom I had a history—for the second time. Lydia had practically taken care of the whole mess on her own, but once the dust had settled and Ellie and Lynne had regained their composure, they had wasted no time before peppering us with a volley of questions.

"L-Lady Tina's spell became incredible!" Ellie had exclaimed. "It was just like that time back at the Howard mansion!"

"The same goes for my dear sister," Lynne had added. "I've never seen a white Firebird before."

"What is the meaning of this?" they had both demanded.

The albatross had dismissed my attempts to deflect them with a brusque, "It's too late now. Just tell them." As a result, I had told them about my ability; about Frigid Crane, the great spell that dwelt within Tina; about the diary of an unknown sorceress that I had enlisted the headmaster to decode; and about the vestige of the great spell Radiant Shield that Gerard had utilized. They had been shocked but appeared to accept my explanation. The spectacle of Lydia's Scarlet Sword had been a convincing argument.

I had reserved a few matters for Lydia's ears alone. They included the uncertain report that Tina's mother, Duchess Rosa Howard, may have been assassinated; the true circumstances behind the death of Ellie's parents; and the words that Frigid Crane had spoken to me during the battle—"key" and "imitation." Mr. and Mrs. Walker would tell Ellie about her parents in their own time. Duchess Rosa's death, meanwhile, was shrouded in too much mystery. After all, it remained totally unsolved despite investigations by two of the Four Great Dukedoms.

"Thank you very much," I said, smiling at the charming maid, "but entrusting your mana to another person is more dangerous than you imagine. Please think of yourself first."

Ellie didn't respond immediately. "Lady Tina won't stop boasting about it to Lady Lynne and me," she said at last.

"Tina...?" I asked, looking over at the young noblewoman who was busy devouring pastry. She pretended to whistle. Guilty as charged.

"Dear brother," Lynne chimed in, raising her hand, "I don't think it's fair for Miss First Place to be the only one. Give me a chance."

"No," I replied plainly.

"In that case, dear brother, I want nothing to do with you." The redhead sulked, turning her back to me with a pastry still clutched in one hand.

"Hear that, you two?" the platinum-haired girl crowed triumphantly. "Our teacher says no, so be good sports and throw in the towel. Now, you want to cast advanced spells, sir? Say no more!" She leapt up and landed on her feet.

Hey now; that wasn't very ladylike.

"Come on, sir! Link mana with—"

"Hold still," I said as I pulled out a handkerchief. "There; that's better. You had a spot of jam on your face."

"Th-Thank you."

Lynne approached me as well, her bangs announcing her displeasure. "Dear brother," she said, "I can't approve of the way you spoil her. Don't you agree, Ellie?"

"Y-Yessir!" Ellie joined in. "I-I think Lady Tina is being u-unfair!"

"I-I am not!" Tina protested, and the trio began frolicking. It was yet another peaceful day.

I'll ask Tina or Lynne to demonstrate an advanced spell for Ellie once they calm down, I thought as I took their place in one of the chairs. I was about to take a sip of herbal tea when a tap on my shoulder interrupted me. I turned to look and felt an index finger prod my cheek.

"You fell for it," the newcomer announced with a triumphant chuckle. "What a simpleton."

"What brings you here, Lydia?" I asked after a moment's pause. "And concealing your mana, at that."

There stood a beauty with gorgeous, long scarlet hair. It was Her Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword and the albatross around my neck. As usual, she was dressed for swordplay—her promotion to Her Royal Highness's personal guard following the recent incident hadn't prompted any changes to her wardrobe. I wondered if she would get in trouble for that.

"This house belongs to the Leinsters," Lydia replied, fixing me with a glare. "Why shouldn't I be here?"

"That's not what I mean," I said. "What about the palace? You can't just leave when you're meant to be guarding Her Royal Highness."

"That scheming princess is in a meeting with the imperial ambassador," she explained. "The commander of the guard is taking care of them."

"I see," I replied after a brief pause.

"What?" Lydia demanded. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"You know I don't," I assured her. "How's Her Royal Highness? His Majesty did say that, when I have the opportunity... Et cetera, et cetera."

Lydia fell eerily silent. "Do you really need to go out of your way to talk to *her*?" she finally asked.

You're scaring me! Is it so wrong to ask after a former classmate?!

"Is something the matter?" I asked as the albatross scrutinized me.

"You're going to be demonstrating advanced spells, aren't you?" she replied after a moment.

"So you heard that. Would you be willing to help out?"

"All right," she agreed, holding out her arms. "Mmm."

"What are you doing that for, Lydia?" I asked, giving her a quizzical look.

"Mmm!"

"No, that's not what I meant. I'd like *you* to demonstrate—"

"*Mmm*!"

Her appeal was insistent, and there was a call for affection in her eyes. She must have had an unpleasant experience.

All three of my students were present, and there were presumably maids in hiding as well, so I gently gripped Lydia's hands in lieu of hugging her and established an extremely shallow link, weak enough for me to sense only the gist of her emotions. Put simply, Lydia was in a bad mood.

"Come on," she pressed me after a prolonged silence.

"I'll only borrow a little. Ellie."

"Y-Yessir!" the maid answered, startled out of her fun with the other girls. "Oh, M-Ms. Lydia?!"

That remark got the others' attention.

"L-Lydia," Tina exclaimed. "When did you get here?"

"Welcome home, dear sister," Lynne added.

All three trotted over to us, their eyes wide. I stood up and tried to let go of Lydia's hands, only to find my own being held firm.

"That hurts, you know?" I told her after a moment.

"A real man endures!" Lydia shot back.

"Yes, yes."

"Only one 'yes'! What do you want to see, Ellie?"

"U-Um, well..." Ellie stammered.

"You're taking too long," Lydia snapped.

"Ooh," Ellie groaned. "I'm s-sorry."

"Lydia, that was uncalled for," I said. "We'll cast an advanced fire spell, all right?"

I set about deploying the most common advanced fire spell, Scorching Sphere, within a barrier in the air above the inner courtyard.

"What a beautiful spell formula!" Tina exclaimed.

"Oh, it's not hot," Ellie remarked, still sounding slightly panicked.

"This is nothing to my dear brother and sister," Lynne boasted.

I hope that was a good demonstration of casting within a barrier and controlling the spell's power, I thought as I dispelled it with a snap of my fingers. *Still, that was too plain on its own.* I turned to the albatross for ideas.

"Disguise the element next," she suggested after a moment's consideration.

"Yes, ma'am."

Countless fireballs activated and collided within the barrier. The girls' eyes widened in surprise as the balls of flame turned to ice that inundated the barrier.

"This trick even worked on the great Lady of the Sword the first time she saw it," I told them. "It can come in handy for surprise attacks."

"Don't lie!" Lydia snapped back.

"You know I'm not," I demurred. "Now, what else should we try?"

Lydia was sending me signals that said, "Need more mana? Just strengthen our link, then," but I failed to notice them. I also suspected that Tina was trying to say, "Sir! Me next! It's my turn!" but I was oblivious to her as well.

I've got it.

"Hey," the albatross protested as I let go of her hands.

"Tina, would you lend me your rod?" I asked.

"Huh? Of course!" Tina replied.

"Lydia, I'm going to borrow a little more of your mana, if you don't mind."

"It'll cost you," she told me after a drawn-out pause.

I shrugged as I accepted Tina's rod and then gave it a vigorous horizontal swing. The girls looked stunned.

"Passable," Lydia commented.

I constructed eight advanced spells within the barrier above the inner courtyard, drawing meticulous spell formulae in eight different colors—red, blue, brown, green, violet, azure, white, and black. I then activated them in a burst of power. Torrents of mana coursed through the enclosed space, forming into eight massive vortexes.

Tina cried inarticulately with amazement.

"A-Amazing!" Ellie exclaimed.

"It's simply gorgeous," Lynne added.

All three girls were hopping up and down, hand in hand, their eyes sparkling with excitement. The scarlet-haired noblewoman, in contrast, was silent and making no attempt to conceal her displeasure. That didn't bode well.

I dispelled the magic with another wave of the rod, severed my mana link, and then returned the rod to Tina. "Thank you very much," I said. "That was a simultaneous activation of multiple advanced spells of varied elements. Remember our 'flower' exercise? Think of this as a practical application of that idea."

"You call that..." Tina began.

"A practical..." Ellie continued.

"Application...?" Lynne finished.

"You'll learn to do the same yourselves in no time," I assured them.

The girls exchanged looks and fell silent. I wondered why—magical creatures and compound activations were more difficult, in my opinion.

"Hey," Lydia pressed me.

“Hang on,” I replied. “You’re about to ask why I borrowed her rod, aren’t you?”

“Explain yourself!”

“I have no experience casting advanced ice spells, and Tina’s rod makes it easier,” I said, obliging her. After a pause, I added, “Although seeing that pale Firebird might force me to rethink my ideas.”

I was skeptical of the prevailing wisdom concerning the strict division of elements—my hypothesis was that the elementals that presumably enabled humans to cast spells were less restricted. That said, the power of the Firebird that Tina and I had cast using her ice-inclined rod during our battle with Gerard had surpassed even my expectations. The assistance of the great spell Frigid Crane might go some way toward explaining it, but there was still so much I didn’t know.

“I wasn’t confident that I could pull it off right away,” I said, raising my hands. “That’s really all there is to it.”

Lydia remained silent.

Tina cut in with a triumphant laugh. “It sounds like Mr. Allen put more faith in my rod than in you, Lydia!” she proclaimed. “Maybe he’d also get better results linking mana with me! This calls for an experiment!”

“Not a chance.” Lydia dismissed the suggestion. “It was your rod he needed, not you. Even if I conceded that a direct descendant of the Howards has the edge with ice—and that’s a big if... There’s no chance. None at all.”

“W-We won’t know unless we try,” Tina objected.

“Then let’s try.” Lydia stretched her arms out to me. “Mmm.”

“Controlling those spells takes quite a toll on my mana, you know,” I ventured after a moment.

The edge of her hand scythed through the air in front of me in a lightning-quick chop.

Eek.

“What a troublesome servant,” Lydia remarked as I reluctantly joined hands with her again. “Now, one more time.”

“Must we?” I complained. “Ice magic is awfully challenging, and— Ow! Watch the fingers! I can hear my bones creaking!”

“Stop dillydallying.”

Mom and dad back home, your little Allen is helpless.

I waved my left hand and constructed a barrier without another word.

“That’s more like it,” Lydia said. “Don’t forget to replenish the mana you’ve lost.”

“I really haven’t lost enough to need—”

“Would you care to experience a point-blank Firebird?”

I didn’t need our link to pick up on the fact that Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter was in an exceptionally foul mood.

“O-Oh no!” Tina exclaimed. “I should have just grabbed his hand and let events take their course!”

What kind of misconceptions did she have about me? Ellie and Lynne’s curiosity seemed to be getting the better of them as well, meaning that...I was utterly friendless.

“All right, then,” I said. “I’m going to take some of your mana, okay?”

“Just hurry up and—” Lydia’s command broke off in an erotic moan as she closed her eyes and trembled. I immediately took the mana I needed and returned us to an extremely shallow link.

This is what I was afraid of.

Merely linking mana and casting spells didn’t require causing much...harm? Replenishing the mana I expended on control and other tasks required a deeper link, although I had no idea why. That said, it did seem to produce a momentary shock.

“Sir...” Tina said accusingly.

“Allen, sir...” Ellie added in the same tone.

“Dear brother...” Lynne joined in.

I wanted to flee from my students’ cold gazes.

Lydia giggled, evidently in an excellent mood. “It’s been a long time since I last gave you my mana directly,” she remarked.

“Now what?” I asked after a pause.

“It has to be ice,” Lydia replied. “The rest is up to you.”

“What?!” Tina exclaimed. “Th-Then take my staff, or link with me and—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Lydia cut her suggestion short.

“Wh-Why not?!” Tina demanded, incensed.

“He already cast the spell once,” the albatross stated flatly. “He won’t need a rod to help him the second time.”

A speechless Tina bit her lip in frustration.

Lydia was apparently convinced that I couldn’t fail. I hoped she realized that this *would* be easier with the rod’s assistance. Well, it was the first time we had linked twice in one day since our run-in with the Hero, so I decided that I might as well give it a try.

"Ellie," I called.

"Y-Yessir!" the maid replied. She was trying to hide her excitement and not quite succeeding.

"Give me the name of an animal."

"Huh?" she said, nonplussed. "Um... How about a horse?"

"A horse it is, then. Lydia, if I mess up—"

"Don't be silly," Lydia said, not even waiting for me to finish. "You never mess up."

I had no response to that. Her faith weighed heavily on me. I flashed a signal to Lynne, who gave the sheath of the sword at her waist a light tap in reply.

Thank you.

"Well then," I said, "here goes nothing."

Within barriers, I constructed the advanced ice spell Imperial Ice Blizzard and the advanced wind spell Imperial Storm Tornado. Mana raged as I brought the spells together; this was harder to control than I'd anticipated. That said, I had gotten a look at the formulae for the great spells Frigid Crane and Radiant Shield, even if I had been mostly unable to decipher them, so I couldn't just rest on my laurels.

The barriers were shrinking, merging, and changing shape. The transformation continued until they were roughly the size of a small dog. The resulting pale-azure horse flapped the little pale-emerald wings on its back and made its way to Ellie's side, where it proceeded to rub itself against her, eliciting a startled cry.

"Th-That tickles," the maid exclaimed.

I let out a sigh of relief. "I tried combining compound activation with a magical creature," I explained. "Did it help you to learn something?"

"Y-Yessir!" Ellie replied. "I m-managed to memorize the spell formulae. A-At least, I think I did."

"I'll write them in your notebook," I told her. "I'm sure you'll have learned to use them in time for your end-of-semester exams."

That provoked a flustered groan. "D-Do you really think I can do that?" Ellie stammered.

"I'm here to help," I said. "Let's work on it together."

"Together, Allen, sir...? I-I'll do my best!" The maid clenched both fists in a show of resolve. She was adorable.

The albatross took a seat in one of the chairs and demanded that I serve her tea. *Yes, yes,* I thought, severing our link again.

"The Royal Academy has two regular exams a year, one at the end of each semester," I informed the girls as I poured a cup of herbal tea. "Your first end-of-semester exam is about a month and a half away, just before your summer break, so let's set goals for each of you to work toward. Ellie, you'll practice advanced magic."

"Y-Yessir," Ellie responded.

"Lynne, why don't you try to perfect your activation within a barrier?"

"That won't take long," Lynne remarked. "And then— No, once I'm head of the class..."

I gave Lynne a confused look as her words trailed off and then decided to move on. "Tina, you'll continue to work on modulating the force and improving the mana efficiency of... Tina?"

The young noblewoman was hanging her head in silence. Even her bangs were drooping. Really, though, it was nothing to be ashamed of.

"Tina," I said, "would you lend me your rod?"

"All right." She assented after a long pause.

I accepted her rod, gave it a wave, and used ice to craft a bunch of flowers, with a ribbon for good measure. I then offered the bouquet to the dispirited girl.

"Sir?" she asked, momentarily taken aback.

"I wanted to show my gratitude for letting me borrow it earlier," I said. "Using your rod really does make a difference."

"Thank you!" Tina chirped as she bashfully clutched the bouquet.

That's better, I thought as I reached out a hand and— *Oops. I almost rubbed her head without thinking. I really must kick that habit; even Caren lectures me about it.*

"Sir, that was your cue to give me a head rub!" Tina—the little devil—pressed. "Please, go right ahead!"

"E-Excuse me..." Ellie stammered.

"You're always so quick to beg my dear brother for favors, Miss First Place," Lynne gibed.

"I know you were dying for a head rub when you were watching Ellie a moment ago!" Tina shot back.

"I-I was not," the redhead protested. "I'm not like you!"

"B-Both of you, stop fighting," Ellie managed to stammer after a panicked exclamation.

"You be quiet, Ellie!" Tina and Lynne responded in unison, prompting a flustered groan from the maid. They never changed, and I was glad of it.

"They make such a racket," Lydia grumbled, resting her elbow on the table and propping up her cheek on one hand with a look of exasperation.

"You think so?" I asked. "I'm fond of it."

"Be serious," she chided me. After a moment, she added, "I've made time next week to work on the great spells and the diary."

"Sorry I roped you into this."

"Excuse me?!" she responded, incensed.

"Hang on, what was so upsetting about that?" I asked.

"Don't be dense," she replied. "Your problems are my problems, and my problems are..."

"Your—" I began to say before immediately regretting it. "O-Only joking. And I'll say this as many times as it takes: stop casting Firebird at point-blank range."

"Maybe I ought to put some real effort into slicing you up and incinerating you," the albatross mused aloud a moment later.

"If anything at all is worrying you," I assured her, "I'll work with you to solve the problem. I'll help even if you don't want me to."

"Dummy," Lydia answered gruffly. She then muttered, "Thanks," as she turned her face toward the inner courtyard. Her ears were slightly flushed—the albatross around my neck was easily embarrassed.

My students stopped squabbling, took their seats, and then commenced sipping tea and nibbling pastries in silence. The winged horse I'd conjured alighted on my lap.

"So, you three," I said, stroking the magical creature, "what do you think of student life now that you've had three months of it? Are you enjoying your time at the academy?"

*

"Wielding spells of multiple elements poses serious challenges. Utilizing an element that none of your forebears have manifested is likewise a challenge best not attempted. I suggest that you devote yourselves to mastering a single element."

The teacher—a man in his thirties who I'd heard was related to an earl—was writing on the blackboard. Despite the need to copy his lecture into our notebooks, a relaxed atmosphere filled the classroom. I was bored.

Tina passed me a note from her seat next to mine. It read, "Lynne, what about lunch?" I quickly scribbled, "The same as yesterday," and went to pass it on to Ellie, but she was lost in thought and looking grave.

It was Lightningday morning, a full day before our lessons with my dear brother. I worried about him screening potential business partners for the Leinsters' and Howards' new exports on top of his already busy schedule, even if it was only temporary. I wished that he would take some time to rest. For his health, of course—I wasn't the least bit hopeful that he would free up time so that I could see him after classes on weekdays as well. I was genuinely concerned for my dear brother's health and had no ulterior motives whatso—

A little yawn from Tina distracted me from my reflections. She was far too lax. *Ah.* Her yawn proved infectious, and I let out one of my own.

"What a charming yawn, Lady Lynne Leinster," Tina mouthed silently to me.

Fine. If that's how she wants it, I've been meaning to settle our score from the entrance exam. I'll give her a good thrashing during our next break.

For the moment, I scribbled down a message in my notebook, tore out the paper, and passed it to her. Tina looked confused, then startled. She frantically felt around her mouth...before apparently realizing that she had been duped. She then passed me a note which read, "You've got a bit of food on your left cheek."

As if I would fall for my own trick. But after a moment, I realized that it was important to make certain. I unobtrusively brushed my left cheek, which was clean. I wasn't like Tina.

I caught a suppressed snicker from beside me.

Laugh at me, will she? Very well. If she wants a fight that badly—

"H-Howard! L-Leinster!" the teacher stammered irately. "Wh-What do you think you're doing?!"

He seems on edge. I wonder if he's getting enough sleep.

Tina and I were unfazed. Ellie, on the other hand, began to babble and sway with panic. I checked my own bosom. Miss First Place was staring bleakly at hers as well.

I refuse to believe that she's only one year older than us! Wait, I told myself, *I have nothing to be upset about. If my dear mother and sister are anything to go by, my future is bright.*

Tina's late mother, whom I had seen in a video orb, had been quite stunning in her own right, but her chest had been less than ample. Tina's elder sister, the student council president, had a womanly figure, so there was cause for concern, but the odds were overwhelmingly in my favor. My future victory was practically assured.

"A-Answer the question!" the teacher bellowed again. His face was bright red.

"We aren't doing anything," Tina replied.

"Yes," I agreed, "not a thing."

"Y-You're lying!" he insisted. "I saw you yawning and giggling! You may be first and second in your class, but not for much longer if you don't behave yourselves!"

Tina and I exchanged glances.

"Well then," Tina said, "our...temporary instructor, Mr. Allen, already covered everything in this lesson."

"Every student here knows how to use multiple elements and all that," I added. "Didn't the teacher who resigned leave you notes?"

The teacher flapped his lips, struggling for a response and ending up looking like a fish. He surveyed the classroom, but everyone either nodded or avoided making eye contact. I'd never known that a person could turn so pale.

In the end, the teacher placed a hand on the blackboard to support himself as he staggered out of the classroom. It appeared that he was done for.

Whispered remarks filled the room.

"I guess he couldn't cut it."

"This simply will not do!"

"I wonder if we could get Mr. Allen back."

"It wouldn't be easy. I'd be all for it, though."

Ha ha ha. That's right; my dear brother is a cut above. He had helped the entire class to significantly improve their skill in a mere five lessons—a remarkable achievement. It would hardly have been surprising had he been hired as a permanent instructor on the spot. If only he weren't so busy.

Ever since his departure, we had spent our days in boredom. I had managed to make friends with my classmates, but I still wished that…

“Tomorrow can’t come soon enough,” Tina muttered.

“I wish tomorrow would come sooner,” I whispered at nearly the same moment.

“Oh my,” Ellie exclaimed, pressing her hands together and beaming at us. “The two of you get along so well.”

I exchanged a glance with Tina and then immediately crossed my arms and turned my face away from her.

“W-We do not!” Tina protested.

“I-Indeed we don’t!” I agreed.

“Um, well…” Ellie faltered before continuing cheerfully. “Mr. Allen told me, ‘Listen, Ellie. You can tell how Tina and Lynne really feel by their bangs.’”

Dear brother! I can’t approve of spreading secrets! You ought to know better.

Tina appeared to share my feelings, because she muttered, “Sir, you dummy. I wish you’d be that soft on me.” The fact that I didn’t feature in her wish was Miss First Place all over. I was about to protest when the bell rang. She’d had a lucky escape.

Everyone was vacating the classroom at once. I needed to hurry—it was lunchtime!

“I’m back,” I said. “Ellie, hasn’t Tina returned yet?”

“Welcome back, Lady Lynne,” Ellie replied. “Hm? Isn’t Lady Tina with you?”

“She said she was going to stop by the staff room,” I explained. “Thank you for reserving a spot for us.”

“Oh dear,” Ellie groaned. “Where can she have gone? A-And thank you very much.”

I set my tray down on the circular table and then passed Ellie some bread stuffed with a selection of meat and vegetables. That brought a smile to her face—although Ellie was older than I was, I felt an urge to pat her on the head.

This must be what my dear brother means when he claims that he “can’t resist Ellie’s smile.” I understand now, but I refuse to accept it.

The Royal Academy was furnished with a number of locations suitable for eating during lunchtime or after class, and the roof of the central building, where we now were, was the most hotly contested of them all. It was closed off in winter, but I’d heard that not a sunny day passed in the milder seasons without students to be seen there. We had experimented with various spots at first, but we had recently taken to eating lunch here because the cafeteria and dining hall were overflowing with people. That choice had led to a system in which one of us would reserve a space, while the remaining two made a run to the shop that sold bread and prepared dishes.

I watched Ellie taking little bites of her bread as I seated myself and bit into my own. It was nice to spend time with just the two of us occasionally. It would have been much noisier with Miss First Place, for one thing.

For no particular reason, I glanced down at the throng of students cheerfully going about their— I gripped the railing and strained my eyes.

"Lady Lynne?" Ellie asked, looking confused.

"Ellie," I said, pointing to the stone statue of the headmaster, "isn't that Tina?" I couldn't see her face, but I could see her distinctive hair swaying.

The slightly older maid joined me and nodded, but she proved unable to speak around the piece of bread still in her mouth.

"Calm down and swallow," I told her.

"Th-That's Lady Tina," she declared after wolfing down the impediment. "I'm sure of it. But what's she doing there? Oh! Y-You don't think she got l-lost, do you?! Oh no! Lady Ti—"

I covered Ellie's mouth before she could finish. Tina was acting suspicious—*very* suspicious.

"Keep your voice down," I said. "I'm sure she hasn't gotten lost; that sounds like something only you would do."

"L-Lady Lynne," Ellie protested, gasping for air, "I n-never get lost!"

"Could you look Tina and me in the eyes while you say that to my dear brother and sister?" I asked after a brief pause.

Ellie began pretending to whistle. She had the same trick for evading questions as her mistress!

Tina started to move, progressing with the utmost caution. Was she following someone? It was no good; I couldn't see. And if I tried to circle around, I might lose sight of her. What was I to do?

Ellie began wrapping up the remaining bread on our table. Her deft movements reminded me that she was Tina's personal maid, even if she seemed more like her younger sister. She drank down the iced black tea I had purchased and then passed a cup to me as well. Did she want me to drink? I drained my cup.

What? Tina's share too?

One more cup of tea later, Ellie cleared away our cups and tray and then handed me the bundle of bread.

"Let's go, Lady Lynne," she said cheerfully.

"Ellie?" I stared incredulously at the smiling maid as she put her right hand on the railing and offered me her left. With great trepidation, I took it. Then, Ellie let out a shout of exertion, I felt as though I were floating...and the next thing I knew, I was airborne.

I-I'm falling!

I was about to attempt a spell when I realized that, although I really was falling, my descent was slow and gentle.

A levitation spell?!

Ellie giggled. "P-Please don't tell Mr. Allen," she said. "I cast a perception-blocking spell at the same time, but...y-you might want to hold down your skirt."

"I wish you'd warned me beforehand," I reproached her once the shock of that realization had worn off.

"Yes'm. I'm s-sorry."

I held down the skirt of my school uniform. I would become unfit for marriage if anyone were to see up it, given that what it concealed was a little—just a very little—childish.

"If I assume Tina is my only rival," I muttered softly to myself, "I may be in for a rude awakening." Not that I had discounted Ellie, but even so.

"Lady Lynne?" she asked.

"Please release your levitation spell and cast a sound-dampening one."

"Y-Yes'm!"

In an instant, we plummeted to the ground and landed without a sound, unnoticed by the students passing to and fro. I looked around. There was Tina, and ahead of her was...

"Dear brother and sister?" I wondered aloud.

"It's Mr. Allen and Ms. Lydia," Ellie remarked at almost the same moment.

The pair of them were walking cordially along the path that faced the exterior of the central building. Their intimacy created an atmosphere that made it difficult to approach them. It was, to be frank, saccharine, and I wasn't happy about it. My dear brother and sister made a perfect couple, and I would never dream of coming between them, but...I wasn't happy about it.

Does my dear brother treat me too much like a child? I wondered. *I've been growing up, and—*

"Lady Lynne," Ellie said, prodding my left sleeve. "Don't you think we should join up with Lady Tina?"

"I suppose so," I agreed after a moment's consideration. "Let's give her a fright."

Ellie grinned wickedly—a rarity for her—and we nodded to each other. Miss First Place ought to know better than to try to steal a march on us.

Could this be revenge for that wind spell? After all the times I apologized for it during our sleepover? Honestly. She's so small-chested—ahem, small-minded*!*

*

The office of the Royal Academy's headmaster was littered with old and rare books. The headmaster himself—Lord Rodde, an elf dressed in a white hooded robe whose age handily exceeded two centuries—was seated in a luxurious chair, and although he was already leaning well into the backrest, he was somehow still managing to edge away.

"And?" the albatross asked sharply while tracing a corner of the headmaster's desk with her finger.

"I-I haven't finished decoding the diary," he stammered. "I need a little more time."

Lydia allowed his words to hang in the air for a moment. "Oh really?" was her only reply.

"W-Wait! Not Firebird! Don't be hasty!" The headmaster turned to me with a look of desperation. "H-Help me stop her!"

"Must I?" I asked, glancing up at him from my seat on the sofa.

"Of course you must!" he snapped. Was that any way to ask for help?

The touch of a paw pad on my hand drew my attention to my lap. The professor had been unable to attend our meeting for a variety of reasons, and Anko, his black cat familiar, was being insistent.

Oh, my apologies. I'd be delighted to pet you.

"I'm terribly sorry," I told the headmaster, "but my hands are full tending to Anko at present."

"What?!" he cried. "Y-You mean to say that you'd put that degenerate youngster's familiar before *me,* the Archmage?! I'll have you know that I'm a person of some importance!"

"I have my grievances against the professor, but I can't neglect Anko; the Royal Capital Cat Lovers Association named it the city's third most handsome feline! Albeit unofficially. During our time at the university, Anko was second only to Lydia in the pecking order, and in terms of popularity—or should I say *paw*-pularity?—it was far and away—"

I clutched Anko and contorted to evade the sweeping edge of the albatross's hand. She seized Anko by the scruff of the neck, cast a levitation spell, and then flung it across the room. The magnificent familiar dispelled her magic in midair and landed gracefully on the desk, where it curled up sleepily. I applauded.

"Who's more important to you," Lydia asked, sitting down beside me on the sofa and sidling up to me, "me or Anko?"

"Do you really need to ask?" I replied.

"Answer the question."

"Well..."

I whispered my response in Lydia's ear and watched as her expression suddenly brightened. Then, without missing a beat, she fired several daggers of flame at the headmaster, who was at a half-crouch and plotting his escape. Her attacks, all aimed at vital points, pierced through nine tenths of his many-layered magical defenses. I was impressed.

"This conversation isn't over," Lydia coolly declared.

"I-Is it my life you're after?!" the headmaster demanded.

"Don't be ridiculous. You ought to take your dear former students' little jokes with a smile."

The headmaster paused for a moment, stunned into silence; then he turned to me and asked, "Is she serious?"

"Quite serious," I confirmed. "Now, let's leave the greetings at that and get to business."

"You call that a greeting? I almost died!"

"That's an everyday event with Lydia around. Would you have preferred her Firebird?"

"Let us begin," the headmaster declared at once, returning to his chair in an instant—I envied that he had the mana to cast teleportation spells so freely. "My time is limited."

Lydia turned to me without a word, wearing an expression that seemed to ask, “Do you mind if I incinerate him?”

“I do,” I replied with a look of my own. “These books are precious.”

“You never let me have any fun,” her eyes complained as she pouted and pressed her shoulder against mine. I took it that she found her unfamiliar duties at the palace exhausting and considered cooking her a tasty meal after this was over.

“*Ahem.*” The headmaster interrupted our silent conversation by clearing his throat. “I beg your pardon, but may I proceed?”

“Be my guest,” I replied.

“Get it over with,” Lydia snapped at nearly the same moment.

“Th-The nerve of you two,” the headmaster groaned before recollecting himself and resuming. “As for the diary...” The mysterious book that had once rested in the Howards’ archive floated up off the desk, its pages fluttering. It had been nearly three months since my leaving it in the capable hands of the headmaster, who might well be the royal capital’s foremost expert in dispelling curses. “I’ve decrypted approximately eighty percent of it. Believe me—it was no easy feat.”

“My apologies,” I replied. “There was no one else I could turn to—except the professor.”

“Humph! I doubt that youngster could crack this encryption if you gave him a year! It’s only proceeding so steadily because you left the matter in my hands. You ought to be grateful.”

“I am most grateful, Archmage Rodde. Who can compare to a tried-and-true veteran of the War of the Dark Lord two centuries past?”

“Precisely!” he crowed, swelling with pride. “You’re quite right!”

Anko had since returned to my lap; I could assume the familiar wanted me to resume petting it.

“But you haven’t completely decoded it, have you?” Lydia pointed out. She wasn’t looking at the headmaster as she spoke—her gaze was fixed on the persistent familiar—but he faltered nonetheless.

“The diary is at least five hundred years old, and its author was an exceptional sorceress,” I repeated for confirmation. “It’s filled with her personal affairs—complaints, her feelings for the person she loved, everyday matters, et cetera. Do I have that right?”

“She was probably about your age,” the headmaster remarked.

"The latest passage I deciphered is replete with joy—it indicates that her love was finally requited. I've yet to encounter any mention of the great spells. That said..."

"Yes?"

"The difficulty of the encryption increases dramatically in the following pages. It's a different beast."

"How so?" I asked, pausing in mid-pet. Lydia scooped up Anko and set the familiar down beside her as they conducted a negotiation of some kind.

"She must not have wanted anyone to read those pages," the headmaster explained. "I designed the military encryption used by the Order of Royal Knights, but this easily surpasses it. At present, I've only deciphered a date and location."

"And what are they?"

"She never recorded either before, but..."

The headmaster trailed off mid-sentence; the albatross was preoccupied conversing with Anko. "Listen," she said. "His lap is mine. You need permission to— What?!" She used to do much the same in the professor's office.

"But she did in this case," the headmaster continued. "She must have wanted to remember the day that they became lovers. She wrote it clearly—it was early summer CC 499, in the divine city of Alrion."

"CC 499, in Alrion..." I repeated. "You don't mean...?"

"The Continental War, which swept the entire world, broke out in the fall of that year. And the following year, Alrion—the city that became the eastern capital—was almost entirely reduced to a scorched wasteland by the great spell Blazing Qilin. Allen."

"Yes?"

"You've given me enough stress-induced stomach pain already!" the headmaster shouted. "Have you no pity for an old man?!"

"Remind me—who here is always boasting about how young he is?" I asked, eliciting a groan from my conversation partner. "I believe in you, Headmaster. I haven't turned up any information on Frigid Crane, so that diary is our last slim ray of hope... Unless you know how to control it, by any chance?"

I wanted to discover a means of controlling the entity that seemed to be Frigid Crane as soon as possible. To that end, I was calling in favors to gather documents on the subject, but progress was far from rapid.

"I do not," he replied. "I told you as much after that last incident."

"Are you certain?"

"No one living knows how to control them. Our traditions merely preserve a little more information than those of you humans do."

"Even though you were so knowledgeable about Radiant Shield? I'd heard that the Royal House of Wainwright are lineal descendants of the Knight, one of the heroes who brought the Continental War to an end, and that they preserved a remnant of his spell sealed in a dagger among their heirlooms. I'm also told that the dagger was merely damaged after a blow from Lydia's Scarlet Sword and was subsequently recovered. That said..."

A moment of silence ensued before the headmaster prompted me with a curious, "What is it?"

"I found it strange." I aired my doubts with a puzzled look as Anko reoccupied my lap. Negotiations appeared to have broken down, and the albatross was sulking. "You panicked when Radiant Shield went out of control, but you remain unperturbed by Tina's case. Why is that?"

"I cannot say," the headmaster replied after a long silence. "It concerns more than just myself."

So, it touched on the pact between all elves—and probably the other long-lived races as well. My fingers ran through velvety hair as I considered the problem.

"H-Hang on."

I was certain that, in the aftermath of the War of the Dark Lord, the elders of the long-lived races had reached an agreement concerning magic that excluded humans. I suspected that education had been its primary focus.

"H-Hey."

As a result, human magical skill had gradually declined. The great spells, which had been the stuff of legend even then, were now banished to the realm of fairy tales. Even the Four Great Dukedoms of the kingdom struggled to pass on their supreme spells and secret arts. Although there had been a marked increase in the number of magic users, great people capable of turning the tides of battle unaided were largely a thing of the past.

"Ooh..."

If the long-lived races had miscalculated, it was in the fact that even their own skill with magic was on the wane. The headmaster was astounding, but the kingdom was home to few other elves of renown.

All of a sudden, I felt a weight on my left shoulder as a little head dropped onto it. “Lydia?” I asked its owner.

“Quiet, dummy...” she replied after a moment. “Keep stroking.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Only one...” The albatross’s words sank to a mumble and she went limp as I continued rubbing her head. Correcting this habit of mine was going to prove difficult.

Is something wrong, Headmaster? What are you making that face for?

“May I take it that we’re done here?” he asked at length.

“What about the being within Tina?” I asked. “The one that seems to be Frigid Crane. What risk does it pose to—”

“How many times must I tell you? None. It’s the polar opposite of evil, and it could never go out of control unless Tina Howard herself were to intensely desire it. It’s nothing like Radiant Shield, which is likely a mere imitation from its perspective. And even Radiant Shield would show its true worth if you were to—” The headmaster suddenly fell silent. “Allen.”

“Yes?”

So, Tina’s emotions really were the most important factor. This was the most information the headmaster could provide us; I suspected that even deciphering the diary was treading the line for him.

“It appears that you’ve spread your wisdom to my newest students as well,” the headmaster remarked, leaning back in his chair and grimacing. “I thought I told you not to overdo it.”

“I thought my teaching was completely ordinary.”

“Really? After a mere five days of your lectures, every student in our most advanced class has learned to command at least two elements. Their control and mana efficiency have dramatically improved as well. I’ve had to replace a number of broken-spirited teachers since your time with them.”

“The students are just talented,” I explained. “And I believe the ‘broken-spirited’ teachers belonged to the so-called conservative faction—nobles opposed to meritocracy. Ones that you failed to expunge in connection with the prince’s rampage.”

“You truly are—” the headmaster began before stopping himself. “No matter. I’ll see to that class.”

“Please do your best for them,” I replied with a nod.

Beside me, Lydia was humming to herself. Once she got like this, she would be off in her own world for a while.

Was there anything else? Oh. Of course.

“How is Lady Stella?” I asked.

“Her?” the elf replied after a pause, sorrow apparent in his handsome features. “She’s been gloomy since the incident. She’s a good child—earnest and a hard worker. Both students and faculty put a good deal of trust in her. That said, in light of their grades and other considerations, your sister Caren was more fit to lead the student council. Add to that a blatant demonstration that her once magically impaired younger sister has outstripped her...” He allowed a moment for the thought to sink in and then concluded, “She needs time.”

“If necessary, I could—” I was about to make a suggestion when a wordless demand from Lydia interrupted me. I raised both hands slightly in surrender. “Yes, I’ll consult you if it comes to that,” I promised her.

“Good,” she replied. “If you try anything on any more girls, I’ll make you regret it. Got that?”

“What do you mean, ‘try anything’? You make it sound scandalous. When and where have I ever ‘tried anything’ on anyone?”

“Never mind that!” the albatross snapped. “Just don’t! I forbid it! You have no idea how hard I had to work at the Royal Academy and the university.” She had been angry to begin with, but her cheeks flushed and her voice sank into an inaudible murmur as she went on. “I can’t believe you keep snaring them when I’m not around, you big, stupid, dense blockhead. I wish you’d drop dead—but not before I do. I absolutely, categorically forbid you to die and leave me behind. We’re going to die on the same day, and that’s that!”

“Lydia?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” she said, startled out of her brooding.

“What? But—”

“I *said*, it’s nothing.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Lydia flashed me a gorgeous smile. Trying to argue with her at moments like this was a veritable death sentence. I was better off leaving that sort of thing to Richard, the headmaster, and the professor.

"How long do you think it will take you to crack the encryption on the diary?" the albatross asked, returning her attention to the old elf.

"I can't even venture a guess," he admitted after a moment's hesitation. "I'm sure I'll make progress once I've found a way to begin, but how long that will take is anyone's guess."

"Oh. Then, work with the professor and get on with it."

"What?!" the headmaster exclaimed. "I-I would never!"

"He gave in, you know," she pressed, stroking Anko with her dainty fingers.

Our former teacher and the headmaster were birds of a feather and therefore loathed each other. They were archnemeses. I wished that they would cooperate, but neither would compromise his demand that the other man yield first, and the decryption had stalled as a result. So, as the professor's former student, I had taken the liberty of meddling in his affairs. After all, he *had* set me up for the job of vetting potential business partners for the new exports of two ducal houses.

"I've received a request for assistance from the professor," I said, inclining my head toward the headmaster. "He says, 'I-I don't need any more potential brides. I-I'll collaborate on the decryption. H-Help!' That reminds me, Headmaster—aren't you a bachelor too? And didn't you withhold your knowledge of this business-screening job from me?"

Panic filled the old elf's face. "D-Desperate times call for desperate measures," he said. "I'll get in touch with him and start the ball rolling on the decryption."

"I'd appreciate it if you could finish by summer vacation."

"I'll do my best," he grudgingly conceded.

"I'm depending on it. Now, Anko—would you kindly inform the professor?"

Anko meowed its assent.

Thank you very much. Now, is that everything? I'm famished.

"Lydia," I said, "you're going back to the palace, aren't you? What will you do about lunch?"

"Eat it," she replied plainly. "I told you—the royal guard is on duty while the imperial ambassador's around. This visit is supposed to last until summertime, and my idiot brother was sobbing that

that muscle-bound freak won't shut up when I'm there too."

"I see." Richard had a lot on his plate too. It would be a disaster if those two went at it, even if only for fun. They might bring the whole palace down.

"So I've heard," the fearless headmaster quipped. "Palace gossip has it that the ambassador proposed marriage to the Lady of the Sword, and—"

"The key to a long life is knowing when to keep your mouth shut," Lydia interrupted. "You've lived at least two centuries already—don't you think that's enough?"

"Wait a—"

"No excuses."

As the headmaster's screams filled the air, I was a little—just a very little—downhearted. So, Lydia had received a marriage proposal. Her beauty was unparalleled—until she opened her mouth, at least—and anyone who merited an audience with Her Royal Highness must have considerable social standing. I supposed that they might be well matched.

Just then, the albatross peered intently at me. *Oh*—

"Oh?" she said, breaking into a radiant smile. "What's this? What have we here?"

"H-Headmaster," I stammered, "I think it's time we were— Ah!"

Lydia threw her arms around me. Perhaps she had overdosed on joy. The headmaster, who was now lodged in a wall, made no comment.

"Tell me—did that spook you? Did it give you a scare?" Lydia giggled. "I turned it down on the spot."

"I-I wasn't worried about—"

"Liar," she crowed. "You wear your heart on your sleeve at times like this."

I merely covered my face with one hand. I shouldn't have been surprised; we had known each other a long time.

"I'm tired..." I grumbled, eventually moving the conversation forward. "I'm vetting businesses, tutoring, hunting through documents... I must be even busier than I was as a student."

"You *are* getting enough sleep, aren't you?" Lydia asked.

"Well..."

"Answer me."

"In a manner of speaking."

"Guilty as charged."

Lydia had delivered her verdict. I scratched my cheek with a finger, while the headmaster remained silent. Was he still alive?

"I don't have enough time," I pleaded. "They're all important jobs."

"The solution is simple," she replied. "Stop reading at night."

"You might as well tell me to stop breathing."

"Then cut your workload in half. Is that clear? The only response I'll accept is, 'Yes, ma'am'!"

"But you see—"

"Don't you mean, 'Yes, ma'am'?" Lydia paused for a moment and then added, "If you're having trouble sleeping, I wouldn't mind us...sharing a bed."

Her offer hung in the air for a moment. "Lydia," I said, "I know I'm repeating myself, but you really don't have to force yourself to say things like that."

The noblewoman moved away from me in silence, her cheeks flushed red as apples. It appeared that the headmaster was alive and listening attentively, because no sooner was she on her feet than she slowly drew her sword.

"Time to slice you up..." she murmured with a stunning smile.

The old elf, a veteran of many battles, leapt to his feet and began fleeing toward the door.

Oh, no. You're not going anywhere.

"I've just remembered!" the headmaster exclaimed. "I-I have an important conference to attend. I promise to inform you if I make any headway on— L-Let go! Unhand me, I say! D-Don't you dare try to use me as a shield! Don't you know that the Lady of the Sword's strikes go through magical defenses like a hot knife through butter?! Not even I could survive one! How many times must I tell you to take your lovers' spats elsewhere?!"

I chuckled. "You wouldn't abandon me and run, would you, Headmaster? Think of all the times we've shared. Now, if you'll just take one blow, you'll buy me the time I need to make my escape. Also, please remember that this is *not* a 'lovers' spat.'"

"I-I sometimes wonder..." the headmaster began. I shot him a quizzical look. "Could you be making the damage worse than it needs to be? If the two of you would just go off and flirt somewhere, the kingdom might have peace and—"

"Go ahead, Lydia!" I shouted. "Slice him up!"

What a rude elf. Now, stop struggling. Hm?

Just as the embarrassed girl swung her sword, the door opened, and my students tumbled into the room, landing at my feet with a chorus of squeals. They were followed by a crash of metal against metal.

"Allen, you owe me an explanation," a cold voice said as its owner blocked Lydia's sword with her dagger. Plumes of flame and flashes of violet lightning scattered throughout the room. The hair peeking out from under the newcomer's beret and the bushy tail behind her were silver-gray. Caren, the vice president of the Royal Academy student council and my younger sister, had stopped Lydia's blow and was now questioning me.

I released the elf, who immediately began gasping for air. He so loved to make a show of things.

"Oh, it was nothing much," I replied with a wink. "But thank you."

"'Nothing much'? Then you had no reason to be playing with swords!" Caren shot back. "And that goes for you too, Lydia!"

"But he—"

Lydia sulkily attempted to plead her case, only for Caren to interrupt her with a firm, "No buts! Allen, you're too soft on her!"

"I really don't think that's true," I replied.

"Yes," Lydia added almost immediately. "He's not soft enough, if anything."

"I'll give the two of you a good talking-to later," Caren promised. She then shifted her scolding to the girls on the ground at my feet. "That goes for you three too. Don't you know not to eavesdrop?"

The reprimand drew a groan from Ellie and a stammered, "B-But..." from Tina. Lynne then finished the thought with a simple, "We were curious."

"No excuses!" Caren snapped.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" the trio cried in unison and then exited at top speed.

You might hurt yourselves running in the halls...

Both Lydia and Caren sheathed their weapons. "You've learned to hold your own a little," Lydia remarked. "But you're my future sister-in-law, so train harder."

"You must be thinking of someone else!" Caren shot back. "I won't have a sister-in-law!"

"Oh really?" Lydia replied. "I think you'll find that I'll fill the role quite nicely.”

“You could never be my sister-in-law!” Caren snapped. “Isn’t that right, Allen?”

"Hmm... Caren, I assume you came here for a reason?" I asked.

Both girls met my attempted equivocation with simultaneous, silent appeals. What did they want from me? Eventually, they exchanged significant glances and then sighed theatrically.

Wh-What a hurtful reaction.

There was a reserved knock at the door. "Enter," the headmaster answered, adjusting his robes and resuming a dignified tone.

"Excuse me," a girl said as she stepped into the room. Her long platinum hair, faintly tinged with blue, was braided and tied with a sky-blue ribbon. She was the president of the Royal Academy student council, Her Highness, Lady Stella Howard. "Caren, Tina and her friends are—"

A shadow passed over her face and then just as quickly disappeared the moment she laid eyes on Lydia and me. "Mr. Allen. Lady Lydia," she addressed us with a smile. "I didn't realize you were visiting. Did you know that Tina and her friends are keeping watch outside? Caren, have you told the headmaster?"

"Not yet," Caren answered.

"I'll tell him, then."

Lady Stella passed a sheet of paper to the headmaster. I could make out the beginning of a signature: "Feli—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're so busy," she continued. "One of my classmates is returning to the academy, and I'd like your approval."

"Oh?" the headmaster replied. "Is she in good health?"

"Much better than she was, apparently."

"I see. I'm delighted to hear it."

"Caren and I will provide our assistance to make up for her lack of attendance. I hope that you'll do your best for her also."

"I'll take it into consideration," the headmaster agreed. "It won't be easy, but give it your best effort!"

"Yes, sir!"

At first glance, Lady Stella seemed the same as ever, but there was something...*off* about her. Lydia shot me a look; she was worried.

"Allen," Caren said, squeezing in between us without hesitation. "I can't approve of you ignoring your dear little sister while you and this sword-crazy pyromaniac converse with your eyes. There's still time—let's eat lunch together."

Lydia chuckled. "Caren," she said, "you have some nerve, trying to make a move on him while I'm around."

"Oh?" Caren made a show of displaying the butterfly-shaped necklace she wore. Lydia staggered from the impact and then snapped her gaze to me.

I gave her that for her birthday, remember?

"Oh, I wonder what time it is..." the albatross mused theatrically as she rallied and took out a small pocket watch. It was identical to mine. Caren almost fell to one knee from the shock and then pressured me with a piercing stare.

I know I've told you that we exchanged watches.

I clapped my hands to mark an end to the fruitless dispute. "Yes, let's eat together," I said. "The three of us—no, let's make it *all* of us. Tina, Ellie, Lynne."

The door flew open once more, and my students raced into the room with delighted cries of "I'm on my way!" "Y-Yessir!" and "Dear brother!"

"What?" Lady Stella asked disbelievingly a moment later. Only she seemed hesitant.

Tina looked somewhat confused. "Is something the matter, Stella?"

"Let's go, Lady Stella," Ellie added, equally perplexed.

"Huh?" Lady Stella took a moment to collect herself. "N-No, it's nothing. Yes, it would be nice for us to eat together."

Tina and Ellie led Lady Stella out by her hands, and Lynne followed them. Lydia and Caren looked exasperated, although I couldn't imagine why.

"Well, all right," Lydia conceded. "This is just how you are."

"You're right," Caren agreed. "This is my brother all over."

Despite their disagreements, they saw things the same way.

"Caren." I called my sister over and then whispered in her ear: "How is Lady Stella?"

"I think she'll be fine," she whispered back. "She's strong."

"Sir!"

"Allen, sir..."

"Dear brother and sister."

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne spoke up in turn.

"Allen," Caren said and gripped my left hand.

"If anything goes wrong, I'll do whatever I can to help," I promised her.

"...Thank you."

"Come on. Let's get a move on," Lydia interjected, seizing my right hand. "Caren, don't hesitate to ask for help," she added by way of warning.

"I won't," Caren reluctantly conceded.

Goodbye, Headmaster. We're counting on you.

Later, while we were all eating lunch, some of the girls' classmates came to join us. Of course, they were paralyzed once they noticed Lydia. The albatross around my neck was the Lady of the Sword—a living legend famed across the continent—and it was refreshing to see her so frankly bashful.

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were full of energy throughout the meal, but Lady Stella was slightly dispirited. According to Caren, a friend of theirs would be returning from medical leave soon, and I hoped that her presence would help to get Lady Stella back on her feet. Her name was Felicia Fosse.

Fosse...? Haven't I read that name somewhere recently?

Chapter 2

I was getting ready in my room on Windday morning when my only daughter Felicia came to speak to me. “Dad,” she asked nervously, “that business negotiation is this afternoon, isn’t it?” After a short pause, she added, “Should I go with you?”

“Don’t be silly,” I told my little girl, who was dressed in the uniform of the prestigious Royal Academy. “This is your first day back at school. Besides, you know you can’t stand conversations with strange men. I’m the president of the Fosse Company”—I thumped my chest for emphasis—“so just leave these little jobs to me.”

Felicia was a short, frail girl. A long convalescence had left her with pallid skin, and despite her sixteen years, she wore no makeup. Seeing her in glasses—too much time spent reading in bed had ruined her eyesight—was enough to pain a father’s heart. I was glad to see her back in such good health, since she had at one point been bedridden, but I couldn’t let her overdo it. There was also the company’s future to consider.

“All right, then,” my daughter continued, touching her long, pale-chestnut bangs. “But I haven’t had a chance to look at this deal because it overlapped with my going back to the academy, and because it was so sudden. There aren’t any weird conditions, are there? And it seems like you haven’t talked it over with anyone else at the company either. Remember, you’re dealing with the Howards and the Leinsters—two ducal houses.”

“You’re such a worrywart, Felicia. Ah, I know. This should calm you down.”

She looked puzzled.

“I hear their negotiator is a seventeen-year-old boy,” I continued. “I didn’t have much time to prepare, and the volume we’re talking about is on the large side, but I proposed generous terms. I’ll be able to seal the deal today.”

“S-Seventeen?!” Felicia exclaimed. “Why would their contact person be that young? A-And this is for a large volume? How large?”

Before I could answer, there was a knock on the door. “Sir, you have a visitor,” one of my employees called out. They sounded awfully flustered.

A visitor? Who would be visiting me at this hour? I realized that my daughter had gone stiff. *Oh no.*

“Excuse me.”

“W-Wait a moment!” I shouted, but not in time to stop a middle-aged man with an aristocratic air from entering the room. He wore a dark-green knight’s uniform, but he didn’t look like a knight to me—he had thinning hair, a corpulent figure, and there was something crude about him that he couldn’t quite manage to hide. He was supposed to be a distant relative of the Ducal House of Algren, which governed the east of the kingdom, but...there was something shady about him.

“It’s been too long, Ernest!” he proclaimed, ignoring my embarrassment. “As for the offer of funds we discussed the other day— Hm? Is that your daughter?” The man laughed. “Her chest is certainly filling out nicely.”

“I believe I refused that offer the other day,” I replied, although it took me a moment to answer. I could tell that Felicia was silently panicking.

“Yes, but I won’t back down so easily!” was his reply. “The favor of a ducal house will be good for business, you know.”

“As I told you, I cannot agree to provide funds without knowing the details of— Felicia?”

My daughter, who got extremely anxious around men, was clenching her hands and shaking like a leaf. Suddenly, she let out a little squeal and fainted.

“Felicia!” I cried, catching her. “Someone, come quick!” After a moment, I turned to the middle-aged man and said forcefully, “My daughter appears to be in poor health. I can’t continue this discussion today.”

“Another day, then. You wouldn’t want to be left behind.”

And with those words, he left.

What in the world was that about?

“You must be Mr. Ernest Fosse. We’ve been expecting you.”

That afternoon, I had made my way to the designated location and found myself taken aback in the building’s entrance. A joint venture by two ducal houses had led me to expect a location near the royal palace, where the upper crust lived, but the address on the paper I'd received was in the capital's western district, on almost the opposite side of the city from my business on the east side. This was the school district, which ranked below even the merchant quarter as far as status went. Nobles, who put a premium on prestige, wouldn't use this place—much less a ducal house.

I guessed that they'd decided to spend their money on the product, not the packaging. Still, wasn't this building too old? And waiting for me at the entrance was...

"Is something the matter, sir?"

My guide is a maid...? She was pretty, with attractive, dark-brown hair, but her uniform was made of cheap, lusterless fabric.

I forced myself to laugh and said, "I wasn't expecting such a lovely guide."

"Thank you very much," she answered. "This way, sir."

The maid showed me into an unprepossessing room furnished only with a table and chairs. It contained nothing of value. I sat down in one of the chairs, rested a hand on my neatly styled hair, and thought.

Had I been hoodwinked? No, this invitation was from a trustworthy source. I also doubted that anyone would be foolhardy enough to impersonate a ducal house. The Leinsters and Howards were known throughout the kingdom and beyond for their military might; making enemies of them would be suicide. On the other hand, there was this building, its furnishings, and even the maid's uniform... The terms I'd offered might have been *too* generous.

The door suddenly opened, spurring me to stand. A young man in formal wear entered, accompanied by a maid—although not the one who had shown me in. This maid had chestnut hair and a rather unfortunate bosom, and her uniform was clearly of a different quality—the very highest, I thought.

"Thank you for waiting," the young man said. "I'm Allen. This is Anna."

"Anna, at your service," the maid added.

"I'm Ernest," I replied. "I represent the Fosse Company."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," the kid—Allen—said. "Please take a seat and we'll get down to business. I'd like to make this a productive meeting."

He probably thought he had gotten the drop on me, but he was still young. Could I seize control of the situation and squeeze more out of him? Still, between his age and his cheap-looking suit, it was hard to imagine that he had much authority to—

Of course. The maid.

"I've read your proposal," the boy began, failing to notice the direction my thoughts were running as I took my seat. "You offer excellent terms, but..." He hesitated. "Are you certain about them?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You specify that you wish to handle the whole range of the Leinsters' wines and the Howards' produce, but can you really turn a profit at these prices?"

"I've determined that I can. I had the honor of sampling the goods and found them excellent. What is your opinion, Ms. Anna?"

"I merely obey," the maid answered unhelpfully. So, the kid would take the lead during the official talks, and the real negotiation would come later.

I've figured out their game. Felicia, is your dad sharp, or what?

But as I mentally chuckled to myself, the boy fired off another question. "In that case, how do you intend to sell the volume of goods you've requested? Pardon me, but I don't believe you have experience handling such large quantities of merchandise. You haven't listed storage places either."

"You're right that we've never done business with great nobles like the ducal houses," I admitted, "but it will be difficult to ship this volume of goods all at once. We have the warehouse space to handle it piecemeal, and we'll find markets for them as we go."

That made the kid pause for a moment. "There's no mention of piecemeal delivery in your proposal," he said. "And you aren't sure of your sales outlets despite also not having secured storage space?"

I laughed. "You must not know much about business, Mr. Allen. There will be time for all that once the contract's signed."

"Then you're really certain about this?" he pressed me a moment later. "You'll accept this contract in its current form?"

"I don't understand your question," I answered, shooting him a confused look. "Doesn't it already have my signature on it—the signature of Ernest Fosse, president of the Fosse Company? The details may need tweaking, but the basic outline is fine as is."

The boy paused again. "I see. Anna, is there anything else?"

"No, sir," the maid answered.

"Then thank you for your time today," the boy told me. "You'll receive our official answer in writing at a later date."

"Huh?" I said. "I-Is that all?"

But we haven't hashed out the details yet! This brat doesn't know anything! What about Ms. Anna?! The maid was...smiling, but there was something glacial about her demeanor. *Wh-Why?!*

"This is most unfortunate," the kid announced with an air of confusion. "Every item on the list bears the crests of both ducal houses, so we cannot accept unreasonable terms for their sale. Please take care on your way home."

*

"We're back," Caren and I announced as we returned to our dorm room. It was Iceday, and we had just finished our last morning of classes for the week. We found our close friend Felicia Fosse, who had only recently returned to school, sprawling her petite body on her bed and cradling her head in her hands. She was still wearing her uniform.

Caren and I were taking all the courses we could, but the frail and shy Felicia was taking only the bare minimum. It didn't help that she was prone to fainting if she came in contact with a boy when we or our other female classmates weren't around.

Our friend groaned, brought her hands down to read some kind of document, then returned them to her head as if nursing a powerful headache. She repeated this process several times over.

"F-Felicia?" I asked. "Wh-What's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"

"Oh. Stella, Caren, welcome back," our bespectacled friend responded, having finally noticed us. She gave us a fleeting smile, answered my questions with a simple, "No, I'm fine. Thank you," then hopped out of bed and threw her arms around me.

"H-Hang on. Felicia?"

She let out a long sigh. "I feel so much calmer already. You're so good to hug, Stella. I can't get this kind of softness from Ca— Ow! Caren, hands off my head."

"You'll crease your uniform," Caren interjected. "And don't baby her, Stella. She needs to hurry up and learn to talk to boys without us."

"W-Well, don't you think that's a little harsh?" I asked.

"Yes! You don't talk to boys much either, Caren!" Felicia griped from within my embrace. She was talkative when you got to know her and was quick to befriend other girls once a conversation got going.

“I talk to them when I need to,” Caren replied as she deposited her school beret on a wooden hatstand and removed her blazer. “Unlike you, Felicia.”

“B-But you’re not friends with any boys at the academy,” Felicia shot back a moment later, fumbling for a retort. “Neither is Stella.”

“Huh? M-Me?” I asked. Now that I thought about it, I might not have had any close male friends; boys were all so distant with me.

Having now stripped down to her shirt, Caren seated herself on Felicia’s bed. “There’s no need to make friends with any particular boy,” she said. “Felicia, what are these papers?”

“Oh.” Felicia paused for a moment and then responded with an unconvincing, “I-It’s nothing.”

“I won’t listen to you if you’re going to lie.”

“C-Caren...” Felicia groaned. “Stella, the vice president is bullying meee.”

“D-Don’t worry,” I said, trying to soothe her. “I’ll listen to you. And so will Caren! Isn’t that right?”

“Hurry up and tell us,” Caren encouraged the girl in my arms, who seemed reluctant to answer.

“My family’s company had a business negotiation the day before yesterday,” Felicia eventually explained. “And we completely blew it.”

“Um... I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“So, why were you double-checking the papers?” Caren asked.

“The deal overlapped with my coming back to the academy, so I never saw them. And then...” Felicia’s head drooped as she left her sentence unfinished.

Felicia’s family operated a medium-sized business that had grown rapidly over the past few years. They were slowly but steadily acquiring a reputation, thanks in no small part to Felicia’s guidance...or so I’d heard. Caren often remarked that Felicia was “the one actually running the show,” but it was too much for me to take in. On the one hand, she excelled academically and was magically gifted for someone who wasn’t from a noble family. On the other, she struggled with physical activity, and as for her personality... Felicia was so shy that it was hard to imagine her running anything. She couldn’t even bear to speak to men she didn’t know.

“There are always more deals to be made,” I said, placing a hand on Felicia’s petite left shoulder. “Forget about it and move on to the next one. Come on.”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right,” Felicia replied listlessly. She was normally quick to shift gears, but even with my encouragement, she still looked gloomy.

Caren flicked the moping Felicia on the forehead, and a tiny violet spark sent the bespectacled girl tumbling onto her bed with a startled cry. “C-Caren,” she protested.

“Tell me all about it,” Caren requested, placing a hand on Felicia’s forehead. “I’ll listen.”

There was a long silence, then Felicia said, “All right. Thanks.” It was clear how much they trusted each other.

All of a sudden, a twinge of pain shot through my chest, but I immediately dismissed it. What... What was I thinking? Caren and Felicia were both dear friends of mine. I trusted Felicia myself. There was no need for me to worry. None at all.

Felicia adjusted her little glasses and explained what had happened. She omitted the names of the other parties involved, but it sounded as though the negotiation had been important enough to sway the future of her family’s business. And it had apparently fallen through because Felicia’s father had proposed unreasonable terms.

“Felicia...” Caren said quietly once the girl was finished.

“Sorry. That was too much information, wasn’t it? Okay! I’ll make the next one count! Thank you; I feel much better now. So, about lunch—”

“Your father said that he was negotiating with a seventeen-year-old, right?” Caren continued, ignoring Felicia’s attempt to move the conversation along. “And the other party was so important that you’re racking your brain for a way to reopen negotiations. Just to make sure—the negotiator was a man, wasn’t he?”

“Y-Yes, he was,” Felicia replied, nonplussed.

Caren stood up and put her beret and blazer back on in silence.

“C-Caren?” I asked.

“What’s wrong?” Felicia followed suit.

“I’m going out,” our best friend replied. “Eat lunch without me. And Felicia”—the bespectacled girl looked up questioningly upon hearing her name—“do you want a second chance?”

“Y-Yes,” Felicia confirmed, looking startled, “but...”

“I’ll speak with him. Be ready this afternoon.”

Caren’s suggestion made me hesitate. After all...

“Caren,” I said hesitantly and with a heavy heart, “aren’t we going to the Howard residence this afternoon? I thought...Mr. Allen wanted us to train with Tina and her friends.”

“Y-You never told me about that!” exclaimed a startled Felicia. “A-And Stella, are you talking about...”

“Caren’s older brother,” I said, answering her unfinished question. “Haven’t you heard of the Brain of the Lady of the Sword?”

Felicia stared at Caren and me in wide-eyed surprise. “Wh-What?” she stammered. “B-But Caren is from the wolf clan, and...”

We both nodded, which made Felicia widen her eyes even more. Then, with an adorable squeak, our best friend toppled back onto her bed once again.

What? Don’t tell me...

“See you later,” Caren said with an exaggerated shrug. “Get yourselves mentally prepared.”

*

As I waited for the girls at a table outside one of the local cafés, I reread my dossier on the Fosse Company, whose proposal I had rejected just the other day. No matter how many times I went over it, something still seemed off. Based on the documents, the company’s rapid growth seemed impossible without a skilled manager to—

“Allen.” A sulky voice intruded on my thoughts. “Your charming little sister is right here, and you’re working? Are you sure you have your priorities straight?”

“Oh. Sorry about that, Caren.”

Fixing me with a stern glare was a wolf-clan girl holding a cup of black tea. She was wearing a school uniform, and her beret bore the silver wing-and-staff insignia of the Royal Academy student council vice president. Her bushy tail waved behind her, suggesting that she was pleased to be spending some time alone with me. We hadn’t had many opportunities for that lately.

“So, what brings you here?” I asked as I stowed the dossier in my bag. “Is it Lady Stella? Does she object to sparring with the girls this afternoon?”

“No,” Caren replied. “It’s the other one I want to talk about.”

“Whom do you mean?” I stared intently at Caren. She looked troubled. Could this be about her friend who had been absent from school for so long? I believed her name was—

Oh.

“Felicia Fosse?” I asked.

“I think you met her father the other day.”

“Caren... This isn’t just about me.”

“I know, but she’s really down in the dumps, and... Allen.”

“I can’t make any promises before I meet her. Is she that kind of girl?”

Caren twirled her teaspoon in lieu of an answer, implying that wasn’t the case. “Felicia is talented but frail,” she went on to explain. “She’s also particularly shy—especially when it comes to men. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her speak with a boy at school. Her condition is so bad that she initially had trouble just going to her classes, although girls dote on her, and she does talk to people once she gets used to them. She could go on about business and sewing forever.”

“Am I right to assume that Lady Stella and my adorable little sister have been helping her?”

Caren paused for a long moment and then said, “I wish you wouldn’t tease me, Allen.”

“I mean every word,” I assured her. “Did you come to ask me if you can bring her with you?”

Caren nodded. I wanted to help, especially since the request came from my lovely sister, but...

“Very well,” I said. “I’ll at least hear her out.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not in the slightest. She sounds quite interesting. And as your big brother, there’s a favor I have to ask of your friend.”

“What do you mean?” Caren asked, looking puzzled.

Oh. I pulled out a video orb and started recording.

“Allen?!” she exclaimed, visibly startled. “Wh-What are you recording this for?!”

“I can’t tell you—that secret is between mom and me. And my request is a simple one: ‘I’m sure that Caren is always making trouble for you, but my sister can be needy, so please be a good friend to her.'"

"I-I am *not* needy!" Caren protested. "And be careful what videos you send to mom!"

"No. And if you're not needy, I suppose you'll stop coming to sleep over at my—"

"I will not. Those are two separate things. Sleeping over is my natural right and sacred duty as your little sister, enshrined in the Brother Exclusivity Act. You have no right to refuse!"

"Caren. You're sparking," I warned her, dispelling the crackles of violet lightning that had begun to shower the vicinity. Even her eyes were violet.

Honestly...

I held out a pastry in an effort to pacify her, and she immediately opened her mouth to snap it up. "You're so mean, Allen," she remarked once she had finished.

"Would you like another?"

"...I would."

My sister and I whiled away the time feeding each other pastries and making small talk until the sounds of cheerful conversation interrupted us.

That must be them.

I ordered three fruit-infused waters from a waitress I had come to recognize, and she promptly delivered them.

No, we don't need any more pastries, thank you. Why do you look so disappointed about that?

After a short wait, my students came into view farther down the street. They were passionately gesticulating.

"We should open with an all-out assault!" Tina declared. "We'll cast Blizzard Wolf and Firebird first thing while Ellie keeps up a barrage of intermediate spells!"

"You're naive, Miss First Place," Lynne retorted. "We'll be facing Caren, and she learned everything she knows from my dear brother. Our first move should be to test the waters. We'll use deception and elementary spells to support Ellie while she makes the most of her silence to launch a surprise attack."

"A swift attack is our best option!"

"I'm telling you, it will never work!"

The girls were in the midst of a heated debate. Had they forgotten to account for Lady Stella?

Ellie groaned. "L-Lady Tina, L-Lady Lynne," she stammered, "I-I think you ought to lower your voices." She looked at me plaintively and then hurried over. "A-Allen, sir!" She had a magical creature—a black kitten—perched on her shoulder; she had finally gotten the knack of conjuring them a few days earlier. But if she didn't slow down...

True to form, Ellie tripped and nearly fell. It was lucky that Caren was there to catch her. "I wish you wouldn't trip over nothing like that," she said. "Was that an act?"

"I-It was not," Ellie protested before stopping herself. "I'm shorry. Thank you— Eek! M-Ms. Caren?"

"Just 'Caren' is fine. Allen."

"Please don't try to make this about me," I responded, shaking my head at my sister. After all, it was a physical issue. "Tina, Lynne, come here."

"Sir!"

"Dear brother!"

The two daughters of dukes rushed to join us. They spotted Caren, who was busy examining the maid, and jointly proclaimed, "The vice president is one of us," as they passed by her to reach me.

"Sir!" Tina announced. "We didn't fight today."

"Dear brother," Lynne said, "Miss First Place bullied me. Won't you comfort me?"

"Lynne?"

"It's true."

"Sit down, both of you," I chided them. "Caren, release Ellie."

My little sister reluctantly freed Ellie and returned to her place in front of me, at which point I gave the teary-eyed maid a pat on the head. Of course, this prompted cries of "Me too, sir!" and "You never learn, Miss First Place. Dear brother?" from Tina and Lynne, respectively. I gave each of their heads a pat as well. All three girls swayed happily, and the magical kitten moved to my shoulder.

Caren held her teacup, looking unconcerned. She had her vice-presidential dignity to maintain—her treatment of the young maid notwithstanding.

"Dear brother," Lynne said, producing a large, blank envelope from her bag and offering it to me, "this is from Anna."

"From Anna?" I repeated. "Did she say anything?"

"After she handed it to me, she sat down in a corner of the room and cowered," Lynne reported. "She said, and I quote: 'How could I deprive Mr. Allen of his precious time?! Oh, I'm a failure as a maid. And after Mrs. Walker warned me too... What a disgrace!' Did something happen?"

"Not much, but yes," I admitted. "Would you tell her not to let it bother her?"

I removed the envelope's contents—more documents concerning the Fosse Company. Anna had made a fresh survey, presumably having found things strange as well.

I was right. There's a different—

"That's an in-depth chart of sales and profits over the past few years," Tina remarked, peering at the documents in my hands with evident curiosity. "They fall steadily throughout the first year, but the decline stops partway through the second, and from there they shift back into the black. I see an evaluation of the business operators and a record of personnel changes as well."

"The number of employees increases, but the management has remained static for the past several years," Lynne added, examining the papers with equal interest. "The general opinion is that the president is a good judge of produce but not a particularly adept businessman. And yet, many still maintain that the Fosse Company is well-run. The very thought that he could rebuild a failing business... It's as though a different person is running the company."

"The management has remained static... A different person..." I repeated to myself and then turned to my sister. "Caren?"

She responded with a half nod, confirming my hypothesis but also indicating that she wasn't quite certain. Then she said, "Allen, I'm going back to the academy. I'll call on you later."

"All right," I replied.

"Felicia has a good head on her shoulders," she assured me. "I have faith that she'll make up her mind to act for herself."

"I see. I'll be waiting."

"Thank you. You girls, I know that my brother is a master of spoiling people, but don't take advantage of him too much. Otherwise, you'll end up like Lydia."

"Yes, ma'am!" the startled trio replied in unison.

Caren walked away with her head held high. I was glad to see my sister behaving so responsibly toward younger students.

"Let's get going once we've finished our drinks," I suggested, turning back to my students. "Mrs. Walker seems determined not to let Anna get the better of her, you know."

*

“Aah.”

“Mmm!”

“Mm... This tastes wonderful, Shelley.”

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were seated in a row and digging with gusto into a truly appetizing vegetable stew.

“Thank you very much,” the Howards’ elderly head maid, Mrs. Walker, replied as she watched over the girls from behind. “Everyone will be delighted to hear it.”

They must cook with the utmost care, I thought. *Time and effort add a lot to any undertaking.*

“Shelley,” Tina said, “these are northern vegetables, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Lady Tina,” Mrs. Walker replied. “The yield of crops is increasing thanks to your efforts.”

“Is that so?” Tina giggled, then she turned to me and said, “Sir!” She was practically screaming to be praised, and for good reason—she had established the systems of production that enabled the north to export such delicious vegetables to the royal capital.

“You’re incredible, Tina,” I said in honest praise of the girl before me. “You have my admiration.”

“A-Admiration...” she repeated in evident surprise. “S-Sir, I also —”

“Mrs. Walker,” Lynne interrupted from her seat to Tina’s right, “is the meat from the north too?”

“It’s snowdeer, my lady.”

Tina was about to protest, failing to notice that a lock of Lynne’s bangs was bent in vexation, but she regained her composure upon seeing Ellie blissfully enjoying her soup. The maid truly was an angel.

After the meal, I turned to Tina for instruction. “It’s not a simple matter of chilling fresh produce for transport, is it?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “Every fruit, vegetable, flower, and other plant has its own ideal temperature. There are also some that are best not shipped by wyvern or griffin. The shaking can bruise them, for one thing.”

“It sounds as though there’s room to explore further methods for transporting and storing such foods,” I said. “Thank you very much. I’d bet you could write a paper on the subject.”

Tina swelled with pride and cleared her throat theatrically. “Feel free to rely on me more often!” she proclaimed. A moment later, a question struck her. “I thought your temporary job was over, sir. Are you still investigating?”

“It *is* over,” I replied as I jotted down some information in my notebook, “but the Howards’ produce is the fruit of your efforts; I must do the best I can too.”

Her eyes widened. “The way you do that just isn’t fair, sir...” she grumbled, her words dwindling as she lowered her face in embarrassment.

“I’m forced to admit, I’m impressed,” Lynne said. “You won’t beat me in the exams, though.” Even as she praised her friend, she was fired up with the spirit of competition.

“Lady Tina is simply stupendous!” Ellie chirped. There was no malice in her purehearted compliment.

What a cozy atmosphere.

“Tina, Ellie,” I said, changing the subject to a question that had been worrying me, “has Lady Stella seemed at all unusual to you? I know she was depressed for a time.”

“My sister?” Tina replied. “She was a little gloomy for a while after what happened, but...now she’s back to being the same dependable president as before! She is my big sister, after all. I can’t wait for her visit to the mansion today!”

“Big sis—I mean, Lady Stella—is doing her v-very best!” Ellie chimed in. Lynne didn’t seem to have any doubts either.

“I see,” I said. Was I overthinking things? I decided to shift gears. “In that case, I think that’s enough small talk; we have serious matters to discuss. As I’ve told you before, end-of-semester exams are fast approaching at the Royal Academy. How are your assignments coming along?”

Tina and Lynne groaned, while Ellie stammered, “W-Well, I...” It appeared that all three of them were struggling. Ellie, for example, had succeeded in conjuring magical creatures, but not at a level that could withstand the rigors of combat. The girls were making rapid progress each and every day, but they did still have classes to attend. I had asked them to complete their tasks in time for their exams, but I honestly didn’t care whether they met that deadline as long as they kept progressing little by little.

“All right, then,” I said. “Ellie.”

“Y-Yessir.”

“I’d like you to teach Tina and Lynne the knack of controlling the force of one’s spells and casting them within barriers. Magical creatures as well, if you can manage it.”

“M-Me, teach my ladies?” the maid repeated, visibly startled.

“Yes. You’re at a higher level than they are. Would you do it?”

“Y-Yessir! I’ll do my best!”

Ellie had her fists clenched in an adorable show of determination, but the two girls who would be receiving her instruction looked utterly dejected. Tina merely groaned, while Lynne grumbled, “Dear brother...”

“Tina, Lynne, I’d like you to help Ellie get the hang of casting advanced spells and assist her with her academic subjects. I think you’ll find teaching each other very enjoyable. And of course, I’ll instruct you as well.”

That startled the pair out of their funk.

“Oh, wow!” Ellie exclaimed with a dazzling smile. “Lady Tina, Lady Lynne, I’m in your hands. And, um... I h-hope you’ll go easy on me when it comes to studying.”

Tina and Lynne exchanged glances.

“W-We’ll have you up to speed in no time.”

“Y-Yes, we will.”

“I’m looking forward to your results,” I said. “Now...” The trio had their eyes on me. I surveyed them and then produced three small floating balls of magic—one blue, one green, and one red—with a horizontal sweep of my right hand. “I have a new assignment for you. Please nullify the magical orbs I fire at you. This is an exercise to improve your casting speed.”

“Give me your best shot!”

“I-I’ll do my besht. Oops.”

Tina and Ellie were full of enthusiasm, but Lynne’s face immediately stiffened. Maybe she knew what to expect, given that I had done this before with Lydia.

“Get ready,” I said. “I forgot to mention this, but if your casting speed fails to meet my standards, I’ll negate your spell.”

Tina’s and Ellie’s eyes widened. Meanwhile, Lynne muttered, “I knew it.”

I set the balls of magic drifting toward the trio. They tried to deploy spells to cancel out the spheres, but their spell formulae collapsed before they even took shape, provoking a look of consternation from Tina, a whine from Lynne, and a stuttered, “M-

My spell...” from Ellie. They hadn’t achieved deployment, let alone activation, and the balls were closing in. Tina brandished her rod, Lynne drew her sword, and Ellie tried to weave a spell as quickly as she possibly could.

The differently colored balls of magic struck all three girls on the chest and burst painlessly.

“I-I don’t believe it...” Tina said.

Ellie moaned.

“That was even harder than I expected,” Lynne grumbled.

“Better luck next time,” I told them. “Lydia and Caren had some trouble with this too, so please don’t let it get to you.”

“Th-This gave Lydia...”

“A-And the vice president trouble?”

Tina and Ellie muttered in turn, repeating my words in shock. The last member of their trio concluded the thought with a pout and a quiet, “This is going to be a struggle...”

“It took Lydia three days and Caren about a week,” I informed them. “I reckon you’ll manage it in even less time, Lynne.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Lynne replied. “My dear sister called this ‘more difficult than supreme magic.’”

“But you’re not your sister. I believe you can do it.”

The red-haired young noblewoman sheathed her sword and turned her head to the side. “W-Well, I’ll master it soon enough,” she said briskly.

“Sir!” Tina interjected. “I’ll get the hang of it soon too! Sooner than Lynne!”

“Impossible,” Lynne retorted.

“Why?!”

“Because you can’t even control the force of your spells properly. I can.”

“You won’t beat me!”

“I will too. I’ll beat you at your own game.”

The pair had once again begun to squabble. They were like small animals.

“A-Allen, sir. I have a question,” Ellie said, timidly raising her hand.

“Yes, Miss Walker?” I replied. “Ask away.”

“Y-Yessir. H-How quickly will you negate our spells?”

“Oh. I didn’t mention that, did I?”

The maid was torn between nervousness and excitement. Tina and Lynne stopped their argument to listen.

"A moment ago, I was measuring you against Lydia during her first semester at the Royal Academy, when she had just learned to cast spells. If you manage to clear that hurdle, it will mean that you're better than the Lady of the Sword was when she started school—at least in terms of casting speed. I suggest you give it some practice once you're back in your rooms."

*

It wasn't until our afternoon tea break that Caren and her friends finally arrived. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne had flopped themselves down at the table and were busy gorging on bite-size treats baked with plenty of honey—perhaps our rigorous training had sapped even their boundless energy.

"It's just plain impossible..." Tina grumbled through a mouthful of sweets.

Ellie groaned. "Oh, wh-what can we do?"

"My dear brother is a bully..." Lynne added.

I can hear you, you know.

Accompanying Caren was Lady Stella, who looked rather uneasy. Apparently, this was her first visit to the Howard mansion since her enrollment in the Royal Academy; Mrs. Walker and the rest of the staff greeted her with a flood of tears. There was also a skinny, bespectacled girl who stuck close to the student council president's side. Her long hair was a pale chestnut color, her eyes were hidden beneath her bangs, and her skin was unhealthily pale. She was also physically frail and slight—about Tina's height, I thought—although her bosom was considerable in size. She must have aroused Tina and Lynne's curiosity because they kept stealing glances at her.

The three older girls were dressed in their school uniforms.

"I'm so sorry," Lady Stella said, punctuating her words with a number of apologetic bows. "I ended up bringing a friend along."

"Please, don't worry about it," I replied. "That said, I'm not certain that I can be of much help."

"Oh, but I know you can work wonders, Mr. Allen."

"I can see where this is going..." Caren remarked to cries of enthusiastic agreement from the other girls. Her and Lady Stella's faith weighed heavily on me.

"You must be Felicia," I said to the bespectacled girl. "I'm Allen. I know my sister can be a handful."

"Allen?" Caren interjected.

"Thank you for always putting up with her," I continued. "I can at least hear you out, so please, tell me what's bothering you."

"O-O-Of course!" the girl replied.

"There's nothing to be nervous about. And don't sulk, Caren."

"I'm not sulking," Caren retorted. "Felicia, stop hiding and explain the situation to him yourself."

"A-All right."

"Felicia..." Lady Stella said, sounding concerned.

"D-Don't worry, Stella. I'll be fine." Miss Fosse relinquished Lady Stella's hand and stood face-to-face with me. She was trembling, but there was determination in the eyes still obscured behind her bangs, and her sincerity was apparent. I guessed that she would transform dramatically if she learned to use makeup.

"You wanted to discuss something with me?" I said, prompting her.

She tried to reply, but she was so tense that she couldn't seem to get the words out. Then our eyes met, and she immediately let out a squeak and began to topple over. Had she fainted?!

"Whoa there!"

I caught her with a levitation spell before she could hit the ground and then looked at Caren. "You see how it is" was her simple response.

"This seems like a serious case," I said. "Would you wake her for me? Lady Stella, please have a seat."

"All right."

"O-Of course."

Both girls agreed, and a spark of violet electricity flew through the air to strike Miss Fosse on the forehead. She twitched, and her eyes fluttered open. She was still floating in place when she met my gaze for a second time.

"U-Um... Y-You see..." she murmured.

"Good morning," I said in jest. "Now, breathe deeply."

"Huh? Oh, a-all right." She did her best to take deep breaths as I had asked. There was something childish about her that reminded me a little of my students. Her wandering gaze became a little more focused as I extended an index finger toward her and tapped her gently on the forehead. She squealed and then stammered, "U-Um, I... Uh..."

"That was a secret charm to help you talk to people," I said. "My sister used it to overcome her shyness when she was little. Now, breathe deeply again."

The bespectacled girl pressed both hands to her forehead and did as I asked.

Caren, that glare won't work on me. I only told her the truth.

"Please tell me what's bothering you," I said once it appeared that the girl had calmed down. "If you feel comfortable like that, then— Oh, would you prefer Caren's lap?"

"Allen?" Caren said.

"Ah. It sounds as though that's not an option. My apologies."

Miss Fosse's expression relaxed a little as she listened to our exchange, although I saw Lady Stella's features stiffen slightly out of the corner of my eye.

"Please, let me take a seat," Miss Fosse requested before lowering herself onto one of the nearby chairs. "I come from a merchant family, and the other day, we were involved in a major business negotiation. It would have been an opportunity to make huge strides...if it had gone well."

"Please continue," I encouraged her.

"But it didn't go well. In fact, when I looked at the terms we had proposed...I was grateful to the other party for not pushing through a contract."

"It was a business negotiation," I said. "You can't expect to win them all. Why not make up for it next time?"

"Stella said the same thing, but..." Miss Fosse faltered, allowing her hesitation to show through. "My father refuses to back down. He insists on reopening negotiations. I'm in favor of that too, but the terms he offered are— Oh! I-I'm sorry. I should have told you that my last name is Fosse. I'm the only daughter of Ernest Fosse, who troubled you the other day." She bowed deeply.

"This is our lesson time," Her Highness remarked with uncharacteristic severity. "I think that's against the rules."

"Thank you, Tina," I said. "And you needn't bow, Miss Fosse."

Miss Fosse made no move to lift her head. "I'm well aware that I'm breaking the rules," she said. "I know, but... Please, won't you give us a second chance? I would like to submit a new proposal."

I didn't respond immediately. I had read the documents earlier that day, and Caren had warned me, but I hadn't expected her to act so quickly. She was decisive.

My silence must have made Lady Stella uneasy. "Mr. Allen," she interjected, "if we've offended you, please save all your blame for me."

"I'm not offended," I replied, "but your concern for your friends is admirable. Hm... I'm not certain what to say."

Lynne fixed Lady Stella and Miss Fosse with a glare that was far from friendly. "Consider my dear brother's position," she said. "He's the kindest person there is—so kind that he'll find ways to meet even unreasonable demands."

"But our tutor is representing both our ducal houses in this matter," Tina added, equally hostile. "There's nothing admirable about showing special consideration at the request of a relative!"

Both girls were correct, but there was no reason for them to have phrased it so harshly. Didn't they see that Miss Fosse had tears in her eyes? Lady Stella looked pained as well.

I cast a levitation spell on my students and deposited the startled girls onto the seats on either side of mine. "Tina, Lynne, I'm glad that you're concerned for me. Thank you," I said with a smile and slowly stroked their heads. "But she knows all of that already, and she still came here. That takes courage, and you shouldn't blame her for it. I hope you'll both grow up to be women who can praise others for their bravery."

"S-Sir."

"D-Dear brother."

"You ask me to do this all the time," I reminded them.

"M-Meanie," Tina grumbled.

"Y-Yes, he is..." Lynne agreed.

Both girls blushed and protested my treatment of them, but they also moved their heads of their own accord.

You'll make a mess of your hair, you know. And Ellie, why are you walking over with such a cheerful look on your face? You even took off your beret. You don't like being left out, I presume? I suppose I can't argue with that. Caren, you're not doing a very good job of hiding your envy.

"Excuse my students," I told the dumbfounded Miss Fosse while I rubbed the trio's heads. "They're especially eager for attention at this age."

Miss Fosse took a moment to reply. "The two of them are right," she said. "My request isn't reasonable."

"Yet, as the effective manager of the Fosse Company, you still can't overlook this opportunity."

That got a reaction from the three older girls. Lady Stella appeared even more shocked than Miss Fosse. Caren must have had an inkling already—as she had indicated to me outside the café—and simply muttered, "So, she's higher up than I thought..."

"I investigate the businesses I negotiate with," I said, indicating Anna's report, "although I didn't notice at first."

The report contained an analysis of the Fosse Company's finances over the past several years—a neat upward trend. Charting the data, however, revealed a steep decline into the red for just one year.

"Unless I'm mistaken, this is the year that the previous president—your grandfather—passed away and the current president took up his post. I attributed the downturn to that transition, but a closer analysis brought something unusual to my attention. This decline actually continued for more than a year, but then it suddenly turned around. The company's wares remained primarily foodstuffs, and no exceptional personnel joined the ranks of its management. The only change was the fact that the president, Ernest Fosse, brought his family from their previous home in the west to the royal capital."

"Sir, do you mean..." Tina said, looking up at my face.

"Dear brother, are you implying..." Lynne echoed at almost the same moment. They were bright girls.

"Your comments earlier helped me to make the connection," I told them.

Miss Fosse was reeling.

"If you only check ordinary documents, the remarkable growth of the Fosse Company appears to be the result of Ernest Fosse's competence. But the impression I formed of him during our negotiation the other day didn't agree with the assessments of the people who have done business with him. Miss Fosse, would I be right in assuming that you arrived in the royal capital before the company's turn toward profitability?"

The final page of the report bore the note: "There is speculation that a different person manages the company."

Miss Fosse let out a long sigh and hung her head. "You would," she assented. "I have a weak constitution, so I always lived in the country before then."

"You don't exist on paper," I said. "I suppose you never accompanied your father to negotiations."

"You're right; I never did. But how did you know it was me?"

"There was information that hinted at it," I replied, unable to suppress a smile, "but I wasn't certain until I spoke with you face-to-face. The negotiation was the day before yesterday. No ordinary student would check the terms or come to see me, and they certainly wouldn't offer to submit a new proposal."

Miss Fosse took a moment to process my words. "I give in," she said at last. "You live up to your reputation."

"What reputation?" I asked, confused.

"I know it's not the best occasion, but I'm honored to meet the Lady of the Sword's one and only partner. I've heard so much about you. I didn't know that you were Caren's brother, though."

It was the audacious albatross around my neck who had so many achievements to her name, not me. My association was merely because I always ended up being roped into her business, and...

"There's nothing impressive about me," I said with a shake of my head. "Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, is the amazing one."

That statement elicited a chorus of protests from Caren and my students as they all addressed me in their own unique ways. Only

Lady Stella held her peace.

"It sounds like everyone here disagrees," Miss Fosse remarked.

"I think that's enough," I said. "Miss Fosse."

"Y-Y-Yes?!" Her face was a study in anxiety. She was shy and frightened of boys, but she had a talent for business and—perhaps most importantly—the courage to take action.

I'd better prepare for a scolding from Lisa later.

"I'm sorry. As the person charged with vetting potential business partners for the Ducal Houses of Howard and Leinster, I can't show you any special consideration. Personally, however, I'll help you in any way I can."

*

"I see," I croaked; hearing Mr. Allen's answer had turned my voice hoarse.

"Felicia..." Stella put an arm around my shoulders.

I was a complete stranger to this man, yet I had barged in and demanded a second chance to negotiate. What had I expected to happen? Were I in his shoes, I wouldn't consider trusting such a person, let alone cutting a deal with them. Ladies Tina and Lynne were correct—I should never have come here. I couldn't bear to stay a moment longer.

"I beg your pardon, but... Excuse me." I stood bolt upright and then practically fled the room.

"Oh, w-wait, Felicia!" Stella called after me. "Mr. Allen, excuse me as well."

I'm so ashamed... I thought as I started walking along the corridor. My behind-the-scenes guidance had brought numerous business negotiations to a successful conclusion, and I was very much proud of the fact. On this occasion, however, my position was untenable, and the other party was far too skilled. As much as I hated to admit it—and I hated it so much that it brought tears to my eyes—I wouldn't be able to strike a deal with the ducal houses.

"Losing heart is bad for your health," my best friend said once she caught up to me, trying to cheer me up. "There was nothing more you could do."

"I guess..."

If the ducal houses had chosen to do business with the Fosse Company, our name would have become better known throughout the kingdom. It had been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but...

"Felicia." Another voice derailed my train of thought. I turned my head and saw my other best friend, Caren, happily wagging her tail with a trio of girls in tow. I stopped, confused, and she took my hand.

"Wh-What is it...?" I asked.

"Come back to the room," she said. "My brother's going to help you."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Stella and I were both taken aback.

"He wasn't clear with his answer," Caren explained. "Speaking indirectly is a bad habit of his."

"I agree," Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard added, nodding.

"Um, w-well..." Miss Ellie Walker stammered. "M-Mr. Allen is a teeny, tiny bit mean, but he's also kind and caring. Plus, he gives me head rubs," she concluded with a giggle.

"Ellie, you've strayed rather far from the subject at hand," Her Highness, Lady Lynne Leinster remarked. "Felicia, isn't it? My dear brother isn't the type to refuse anyone who comes to him for help."

"Huh?"

What did they mean? Hadn't he turned me down?

"Tell me," I pressed Caren. "Do you really mean that Mr. Allen is...willing to help me?"

"I do," she replied.

"But that certainly sounded like a refusal to me."

"If you only listen to the first part."

"What do you mean?"

"Allow me to explain!" Lady Tina interjected. She had her hands on her hips and was proudly throwing out her chest—what little chest she had, anyway. "My tutor agreed to help you 'personally'!"

"My dear brother does have a position to consider," her red-haired peer continued, striking the same pose beside her. "Actually, I'm certain that was a precaution against my dear mother and sister."

"And maybe against you two as well, Lady Tina, Lady Lynne," the maid added with a cheerful smile.

"Ellie..." the two young noblewomen growled in unison.

"Oh! I-I'm sorryyy!"

What are they talking about? He was just being polite, surely. I may be his sister's friend, but my family tried to land a contract with terms we couldn't continue doing business under. No one's good-natured enough to help me after that!

"What is the biggest issue in a transaction for the Howards' new agricultural products?" I asked Mr. Allen. He and I were in a rest area set up in the inner courtyard of the Leinster mansion.

"The new varieties last for a long time, but you mustn't forget that they're adapted to the northern climate," he replied.

"Meaning?"

Um...

"Meaning we'd need to work to bring storage conditions closer to that climate and also be careful with how we transport them?" I ventured.

"Precisely. According to my teacher, that goes for all foodstuffs, whether you're dealing with wine or produce."

"Got it!"

"Do you have any other questions?"

"Well, what do you think the Fosse Company needs?"

"That's a good question," Mr. Allen replied. Before he answered, he issued a series of warnings to the participants in the nearby sparring match without even looking at them. "Tina, Lynne, stop relying so heavily on supreme spells. Ellie, your spells are becoming too predictable. Caren, you've got a bad habit of shielding your dominant hand when you shift between offense and defense; work on it."

Caren was battling the trio of girls in a training area set up in the courtyard. The speed and scale of their mock combat defied belief. I had certainly never imagined that I would get to see two varieties of supreme magic—the supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf and the supreme fire spell Firebird—in my lifetime, especially not cast by girls younger than me. The ducal houses really were something.

The rumor that Lady Tina Howard couldn't use magic had turned out to be false. Stella had written to me about Lady Tina's situation, but there was no way that a girl who had been unable to cast a spell until just a few months ago could be capable of all this. And, speaking of Stella—what was bothering her? I thought back to our prior conversion.

“Welcome back,” Mr. Allen had said in greeting once we’d returned to the room. He’d been waiting and had his documents ready. “I suggest we all move to the inner courtyard. Tina, Lynne, Ellie, break time is over. Caren, Lady Stella, may I ask you to spar with them?”

“Yes, sir!” the three first-years had responded in unison, running on ahead with ample excitement. Caren had followed them, warning that she “wouldn’t hold back.” Stella had been about to go as well...but then she had suddenly paused.

“I’m sorry,” she had said. “I’m not feeling well. Would you mind if I sat today’s lesson out?”

But she had seemed so lively before then.

Lady Tina and Miss Walker had asked Stella worried questions, looking completely heartbroken, while Mr. Allen and Caren conversed with their eyes. Stella had at least joined us in the inner courtyard and taken a seat next to mine, but her attendance was only brief—once the sparring match inside the barrier and my interrogation of Mr. Allen were both underway, she had stood up unsteadily, looking awfully pale, and announced that she would be leaving early because she “felt ill.”

Illness is supposed to be my thing. She looked almost shocked to me.

“G-Get ready!” Miss Walker shouted as she surrounded Caren with a tremendous number of intermediate spells.

She’s a better sorceress than me, and I’m a third-year. Actually, why even make the comparison? She can use more than one element, for one thing.

The maid’s spells all fired at Caren. Blizzard Wolf and Firebird barreled into the resulting explosion, creating a spectacle of ice and fire.

Isn’t that dangerous? Should someone stop them?

“That was too easy,” an unruffled voice said from behind the first-years. “You learned from my brother, and that’s the best you can do?” There stood my best friend, calm and composed. Her appearance prompted a startled exclamation from Lady Tina, a groan from Miss Walker, and a grunt from Lady Lynne. “I can attack too, you know.”

The trio looked startled as, with a thunderous roar, a dust cloud filled the barrier in the inner courtyard. Caren had been using her overwhelming speed to toy with the first-years since the start of their sparring match, and they had yet to land a hit on her. I’d always known that Caren was strong, but was shrugging off supreme spells even possible...?

Of course, Mr. Allen was the most incredible person here. He knew every detail of the mock battle despite conversing with me, reading documents, and petting the black kitten on his lap at the same time. That couldn't be normal. Still, he didn't seem to realize how much of an influence he had on people.

"You're moving well, Caren," he commented. "I have no complaints."

"Thank you," my friend replied. Her voice was deadpan, but her ears were twitching, and her tail was wagging as happily as I'd ever seen it. The amount of violet lightning around her was also growing. The first-years looked tense.

"Excuse me," Mr. Allen said, his attention now back to me. "I think you need to give up on getting everything."

"Give up...?" I repeated.

"I don't think the Fosse Company has the resources to manage all of the products on this list while opening new markets for them. You should focus on safe, dependable transactions."

He was right. Although we couldn't ruin the ducal houses' reputation, I reckoned that we could end up doing some damage.

"Of course, this is merely my personal opinion," Mr. Allen added, ignoring my inner turmoil. He sounded like an actor reciting his lines. "You may hear something similar in the next few days, though."

I spluttered. Did he mean...?

I reached for my cup of tea. The aroma that filled my nostrils as I brought it closer marked it as black tea of the finest quality.

"I'm honestly surprised," I said. "I didn't think you would be okay with something like this." Caren had described her brother as the kindest and most warmhearted person in the world. Of course, I'd been shocked to find out that he was the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.

"I'm not a saint," he replied. "You've only just returned to school, you're shy, and you're nervous around men. It must have taken courage for you to come here to see me, even if you are friends with my sister. I simply thought that courage required compensation."

"Forget I said anything. You're exactly the person I thought you were." This man was too kind for his own good, but he was also the only person chosen by the Lady of the Sword. "Although, you're a lot meaner than I'd heard."

"Every girl I know seems to tell me that," Mr. Allen said. "I'm sensitive, you know. I might just weep." He then launched into a show of pretending to cry. I was about to poke fun at him again when a lovely girl holding a rod ran over and planted herself between us with her arms outspread.

"Felicia, what did you say to my tutor?" Lady Tina demanded, fixing me with a piercing glare. Did she think I'd been trying to strong-arm him in our negotiations?!

"U-Um..." I stammered.

"You won't get away with making him cry on my watch! I'll protect him!"

"Y-You've got it all wrong." I turned to the young man for help, but he continued his crocodile tears while smirking at me through his fingers. "M-Mr. Allen, please tell her that— Eek!" The girl had abruptly thrown her arms around me.

Th-That tickles!

"We're about the same height, but you're so much bigger and softer," she said. "It defies reason!"

"S-Stop!" I cried.

Sh-She must be in pretty good shape. I'm too weak to get awayyy!

After a long moment, the young noblewoman declared, "This is a serious offense. Ellie! Lynne!" She called for her friends without relaxing her hold on me.

"What is it?" Lady Lynne asked. "Hurry up and bring us something to— Ah. This demands an investigation."

"Th-That long hair of hers is just asking to be braided!" Miss Walker added cheerfully.

How did I suddenly end up in this situation?! As the girls continued to have their fun with me, I glared at Mr. Allen, who was now stifling laughter. *The nerve of him! It's strange, though; I've never been able to speak with the boys in my classes at the academy, but this feels so natural. Did his charm work?*

"Allen," Caren said, finally coming over to check on the situation. "You should know that having fun at my best friend's expense is"—she paused for a moment—"fine every once in a while, I guess. Brew more tea for me."

"Caren?!" I cried, shocked.

"I've got no sympathy for anyone who's all skin and bones yet still gets your…*assets*.”

“There’s nothing good about being big, you know…”

“That’s what you all say,” Caren retorted. “Allen?”

“It’s nothing,” Mr. Allen told her. “Tina, Ellie, Lynne, let Miss Fosse go.”

“All right,” the girls said as they all stepped away from me.

Hang on.

“Mr. Allen?” I said, my tone accusatory.

“Are you feeling a little less shy, Miss Felicia Fosse?” he asked. “Let me brew you another cup of tea by way of apology. Tina, that was a fine performance, but you got a little *too* into character.”

“I meant what I said!” Lady Tina declared. “I’m going to protect you, sir!”

“You can’t depend on Miss First Place,” Lady Lynne interjected. “Place your trust in me instead, dear brother.”

“I-I’ll do my best too, Allen, sir!” Miss Walker added.

“Thank you all,” Mr. Allen said. “Now, please help me to prepare the tea.”

“Yes, sir!” the first-years replied in cheerful chorus and trailed along after Mr. Allen. They were really attached to him.

That left Caren and me alone.

“So…” I said.

“That’s my brother,” she replied. “Where’s Stella?”

“She said she wasn’t feeling well. Caren, I might be imagining things, but…”

“Yes?”

“Stella’s not herself, is she? She even left early today.”

“I guess not,” Caren admitted.

“She’ll be all right, won’t she?”

“Stella’s tough. She can keep moving forward.”

Caren was right, and I believed in Stella too, but…I still felt uneasy, and I wasn’t sure why. Caren must have felt the same.

“Allen and Stella have some things in common,” Caren continued, appraising our best friend in an effort to convince herself. “They’re both indifferent to how other people see them, and they don’t expect anything in return for their skills. On the other hand, they’re their own harshest critics. They only seek help as a last resort, and they won’t open up to you until they’ve got no other options.”

“I think that goes for you too, Caren.”

"Allen believes in me, so I believe in myself and go to him for help."

"You sure do love your brother."

"Of course I do. He's my only brother in the whole wide world."

"You didn't even hesitate..." I marveled. Caren looked confused.

What? Doesn't she realize? You've got to be kidding me. But, well, who cares? Now's the time to focus on myself! We can both ask Stella what's bothering her once this is over.

I shifted gears and began checking what I had written in my notebook.

*

"Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me again today," I said.

"Don't mention it," the intolerable brat—that is, *Allen*—responded. "Now, to business. What brings you here, Mr. Fosse?"

Where does he get off, asking me that?! Does he realize how many times he's turned down my requests to reopen negotiations?!

Before I could answer, my darling daughter in the seat beside me bowed. "We're terribly sorry about the other day," she said. "We lack experience in large transactions and submitted an erroneous set of terms. We're here today to deliver our apologies, as well as a fresh proposal."

"And you are?" the boy asked.

"Ernest Fosse's daughter, Felicia."

"Don't interrupt, Felicia," I warned my girl. "We're in the middle of an important business negotiation."

"Would you show me your new proposal, then?" the kid continued without missing a beat.

"Here it is," Felicia said as she promptly complied. This proposal was more modest than our last one; we were asking only to trade in a single type of red wine. It was a low-volume contract without much profit to sweeten the deal. Even the papers themselves were nothing fancy—just an itemized list of key points. I'd been against submitting it as a formal document, but I'd been overruled. Would they really go for a deal like this?

To make matters worse, Felicia had insisted on being part of the negotiation. Most of the time, she couldn't even manage to speak to men outside our family and the company...but you wouldn't have known it, looking at her then.

The boy finished reading the document. “Mr. Fosse,” he said.

“Y-Yes?”

“This is superb. We would be delighted to do business with you.”

“...What?”

I-Is he serious? He wants to do business with us?

Felicia’s fists were clenched.

“At our last meeting, you expressed an interest in handling every variety of wine and produce on the list,” the kid explained. “On this occasion, however, you’ve requested only the Leinsters’ red wine. You’ve also clearly indicated where you intend to store it, how you intend to sell it, and even the method of delivery. I can justify this transaction to both ducal houses.”

“I-I see,” I said.

“Are you dissatisfied?”

“N-No, I’m—”

“Father.” Felicia interrupted me and shook her head. We didn’t need to partner with two ducal houses for such a minor contract, even if it was probably meant to lay the groundwork.

“Are you sure nothing is the matter?” the kid asked. “For my part, I wouldn’t object to signing a provisional contract.”

I considered the suggestion for a moment and then said, “We’d like some time to—”

“May I ask a question?” Felicia interrupted me again.

“You may,” the kid replied.

“Are there any other wines or types of alcoholic drinks that aren’t on the list?”

“Why do you ask?” The kid stopped smiling and stared straight at Felicia. You could cut the tension with a knife.

Wh-What’s going on here...?

“The Ducal House of Leinster encourages the development of winemaking, but the majority of their product was consumed within the duchy and therefore never reached the royal capital. Now that they’ve started putting that wine on the market, however, it’s only reasonable to wonder whether they have something less common to offer.”

“Please continue,” the kid said, encouraging her.

“One could say that the Howards are simply more focused on produce, but the Leinsters excel there as well. For that reason, I was wondering if the Howards have prepared some distinctively northern liquor to balance the scales."

I forced a lively chuckle. "Please excuse my daughter," I said. "She has an overactive imagination."

"Well?" my little girl pressed. "Am I correct?"

Allen broke into a grin. A moment later, there was a reserved knock on the door, and the chestnut-haired maid entered carrying a tray. "Excuse me," she said.

"Listen to this, Anna," the kid called to her. "She figured it out, just as I thought she would."

"You mean to say she got the better of you, Mr. Allen?" Ms. Anna answered. "What a disaster! I must report it to my mistress!"

"I suppose she'll be upset with me. Are you sixteen, Miss Fosse?"

"Y-Yes. My birthday was last month," Felicia replied.

"In that case, alcohol shouldn't be an issue. Don't drink too much of the clear one—it's quite strong."

Ms. Anna set three small glasses on the table, each containing a different drink. I recognized red and white wines, but what was the clear one? I decided to take a sip of each. The first two were exquisite, and the clear stuff was— Intense! My throat was on fire, and Felicia started to cough.

"Anna," the kid said.

"Miss Fosse, would you care for some water?" the maid offered.

"Th-Thank you," my girl replied.

"So, what do you think?" Allen asked. "All three are excellent, in my opinion."

He was right about the quality, but that clear drink wouldn't go over well. I couldn't see it catching on with the average person.

"What do you think, father?" Felicia asked.

I took another moment to mull things over. "The wine will sell, but this clear stuff is going to be tricky."

"Which will you choose?" the kid said.

"What?"

"I'd like to strike a deal with you for one of these, in addition to the red wine. We'll provide detailed documentation."

"I have it here," Ms. Anna said and handed the papers to Felicia and me. All three drinks came in small quantities—a secret weapon for negotiations, I guessed. The clear drink was called "distilled liquor" and came from the north, but one of the wines would be a better choice in this—

"I think we should take the distilled liquor," my daughter announced, much to my surprise.

"Oh?" Allen sounded intrigued.

"Father, I thought that they all tasted excellent. Am I wrong?"

"Y-You're right," I said, "but—"

"In that case, I'd like to supply distilled liquor to northerners in the capital. Would you mind?"

"What do you say, sir?" Allen asked, returning his attention to me.

Before I knew it, I had signed the provisional contract. Once that was done, we had a pleasant chat in a relaxed atmosphere—the polar opposite of our last meeting. I thanked my lucky stars that I'd brought Felicia along.

"So, you plan to continue your studies at the university?" Allen asked Felicia. "What will you do once you graduate?"

"I plan to help out at home," she answered.

"Is that so? I had a request for you, but I wouldn't want to interfere."

"Please, ask away," I said. "But if you ask for her hand in marriage, I'm dead set against it," I added with a hearty laugh.

"That's an attractive suggestion," he remarked. "Miss Fosse, after you graduate, would you consider working here—assuming that the two ducal houses are still operating this joint venture then?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

"What...?" Felicia seemed just as surprised.

The sudden offer stopped my thoughts in their tracks. What would the Fosse Company do without Felicia?!

"With the understanding that you could return to your family's business, of course," the kid added. "I doubt that I'll be here then, but I'll inform my superiors if you're interested. Please consider it, at least; you might enjoy the chance to broaden your horizons."

*

As I was lying in bed, Mr. Allen's parting words rang in my ears: "As I told you earlier, please don't give me an answer right away. Think it over, and if you still remember when you've graduated from the university and would like to take me up on the offer, please let me know."

I closed my eyes. I'd taken the day off school, and the next day, I'd...

It was no use; I couldn't sleep.

I had never given my future too much thought. Once I graduated from the Royal Academy, I'd move on to the university. And when I graduated from the university, I'd help out with the family business. A few years after that, I'd most likely inherit the company and get married to someone nice who wouldn't mind my staying in business—not that I could picture myself going out with a man. Then, I'd have children and raise them while I worked. That was the extent of my plans.

Never had it occurred to me that I might have other options, and Allen's offer had caught me so off guard that my response had been both rude and outrageous. I pressed my head into my pillow and squirmed as I relived the embarrassment.

"Do you mean that you want me?" I had said. What had I been thinking?! What could have possibly led me to such a conclusion, and what had driven me to say it out loud?!

Think these things through next time, Felicia! I'm begging you! Have you even looked in a mirror?! Oh, I wish I could just disappear. I'm so embarrassed I could die.

As if something like that could ever happen. I mean, there was my appearance, for one thing. I was short and scrawny with sickly pale skin and a disproportionately large chest. There was nothing appealing about me; even I thought I was a weirdo. I did know a little about business, but who needed that?

Still...Mr. Allen had sounded so certain.

"I want to see what you'll create when you have a great canvas to work on," he had said fancifully. "And the range of new products we handle here will continue to grow. Isn't that right, Anna?"

"I am but a humble maid" was her response.

"That sounds like a 'yes.' What do you think?"

"I-I'm still a novice," I had protested.

"I'm talking about the future," he had assured me. "Please consider it, Mr. Fosse. And please accept this as a souvenir."

"What's that?" my dad had asked, looking confused.

"Try drinking it. It may surprise you."

I remembered Mr. Allen's childlike grin when he'd handed my dad the bottle of red wine—not the wine we had signed a contract for, but a rare, ultrahigh-end variety meant for the upper classes. To think he'd had even more up his sleeve, on top of what I'd pointed out! I finally understood why Caren grumbled about him—he didn't play the least bit fair. He'd known exactly what to say to rattle me.

The Leinsters' and Howards' offerings for their first year in business were already extensive, and they were sure to grow. I anticipated that the funds at their enterprise's disposal would skyrocket, and I thought that they might even be enough to turn the kingdom's stagnant commercial power structure on its head.

It sounded so...*fascinating*. I realized again how much I loved gathering data to prepare for a successful business negotiation—although I didn't do well with most men, who only stared at my chest.

At the same time, seeing Caren and the first-years practicing magic had made me realize that I couldn't be like them—that I could never reach their level or take that much joy in spellcasting. But when it came to business, I could picture myself keeping up with even Mr. Allen—or at least *almost* keeping up with him.

I decided to neatly summarize the situation and my thoughts about it.

The negotiation had been a success for the Fosse Company...but a personal loss to me. Leaving a losing streak unbroken wasn't my style.

Mr. Allen had invited me to work for the ducal houses, and I had until I graduated from the university to give him my answer.

Mr. Allen's authority seemed to be growing. That was obvious, no matter how much he might deny it.

I wasn't cut out for spellcasting.

Taking all that into account, my next course of action seemed clear. I knew what I needed to do.

"Felicia, are you all right?" my dad asked as I descended the stairs the next morning. "We've been worried about you. You shut yourself in your room as soon as we got home yesterday, and you didn't even come out for dinner. Good grief... That kid had some nerve, trying to recruit you out from under my nose! Still, you should try some of this red wine when you come home this weekend; it's amazing!"

"You must be hungry," my mom added. "Have some soup."

The warm reception made me falter. I gently tapped a finger to my forehead, then stood up straight and said, “Father, mother, I have something important to tell you.”

“Hm? What is it now?” my dad asked. “If it’s about yesterday’s negotiation, don’t worry. That liquor tastes great, so I’m sure it’ll sell.”

“Dear,” my mom chided him, picking up on my attitude. “I’m sure it’s more important than that, isn’t it, Felicia? Go on. Tell us.”

I was about to say something very ungrateful to my parents—something they might even disown me for—but I couldn’t lie to myself. And if they did end up disowning me, I’d lay the blame squarely on—

Stupid. This is supposed to be an important discussion, remember?

I worked up my nerve and said exactly what was on my mind.

“You see, I...”

*

I called at the Leinster mansion on Darknessday night, after I had finished my tutoring. The reason was simple—I had been summoned.

“Tell me, how did the vetting process turn out?” Lisa asked, sounding quite like she was enjoying herself. She was wearing a luxurious scarlet dress and was seated across from me in an antique chair.

“Objectively speaking, it was a failure,” I replied.

“A grand success, I believe,” the Leinsters’ head maid traitorously reported. She was standing beside me and wearing her usual smile.

“What do you say to that, Allen?” Lisa pressed.

“That I have no aptitude for business. Please replace me with someone more talented for future screenings.”

“You don’t say? After you executed contracts with more than ten trustworthy business partners in such a short time?”

“Anyone could have done as much. A more proactive person could have managed double that amount.”

“And it would have caused problems later,” Lisa replied simply. “Allen.”

“Yes?”

“Humility is a virtue, but it can be taken to excess. Well done. This should work out nicely.”

"Th-Thank you very much," I stammered. I had always struggled at dealing with praise; I wondered whether Lydia ever experienced the same issue. "And what will work out nicely?"

"My return to the south," Lisa announced offhandedly. "The pleas have given way to screams."

Oh dear.

I'd thought that her stay in the capital was awfully prolonged, but apparently, overseeing the selection of merchants for her house's new goods hadn't been the only reason—she had also been forcing her subordinates to run the duchy without her.

Lydia, I hope you won't turn into someone whose every move affects the whole game board.

"I'd been thinking that it was about time," I said.

"I have to put my dear subordinates through their paces—with love, of course," Lisa remarked. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes, mistress," Anna chirped. "Mine have made great strides in the past few months as well."

It's probably an effective method, but I wouldn't want to be any of the people working under them.

I bowed my head. "Thank you very much. This has been a valuable experience."

"Think nothing of it," Lisa replied. "Once your tutoring position comes to an end, the House of Leinster will put you in charge of all our commerce in the royal capital. Of course, we'll reconsider if your situation changes. I'll discuss the matter with the Howards as well."

I was speechless for a moment before I managed to stammer, "A-Are you serious?"

"You're free to make any transactions that won't damage our fortune," Lisa continued. "Consult me about those that do."

"Is this bullying?"

"You can manage. I'm quite proud of you." Lisa patted my head. She was just like Lydia, and she had just saddled me with an inconceivable challenge—albeit one that was still some time away—that I had no right to refuse. I felt faint.

I'd better tell her about Miss Fosse.

"I lack talent, but I'll repay your generosity if, by any chance, it does come to that," I said. "There is one person who, if possible—"

"You mean Felicia," Lisa interrupted me. "She was happy to accept your offer."

"She was?!" I asked, startled. "And you've met her?"

"I have. You wanted her badly enough to play favorites; how could I not be intrigued?"

"Of course I did after the talent she displayed. If she'll be joining the enterprise, I can rest easy."

That's a relief. I don't plan on quitting my tutoring job until the girls leave the nest far behind them. There are also the great spells to consider—finding a way to control Frigid Crane won't be easy.

I decided to foist anything business-related onto the bespectacled girl.

"She told me all about her passion," Lisa continued, sounding amused. "She figured out that the house, furnishings, and maids' uniforms were part of your vetting process, you know. How did you put it, again? 'I want to sign contracts with business partners who will treat the merchandise with care. I can't work with someone who changes their attitude on account of a building. The furniture and outfits appear cheap, but a discerning person will realize that they're products of the north and south—and that the stitching is meticulous.' She told me that needlework is another one of her specialties. Does that frustrate you?"

"I'm ashamed that I didn't give the matter enough thought," I replied.

Lisa chuckled. "I take it you're jealous?"

"I'm burning with envy."

Miss Fosse was extraordinary. She rivaled Lydia and Tina, although her talents lay in a different area. That was why I couldn't bear seeing her potential go to waste. And now I was being teased as a result. I had only myself to blame.

"I'll depart the royal capital tomorrow," Lisa announced. "I'm leaving Anna here, so alert her if anything comes up."

"I will. What about your send-off?"

"You know I can't stand them. Tell my girls not to see me off either. What will you do over the summer? Grandfather, grandmother, and the rest of the family have been dying to see you."

For the past three years, I'd spent my summers either visiting my parents with Lydia or joining her on the Leinsters' southern estates. Still, I declined Lisa's offer with a shake of my head. "I appreciate the invitation, but I'm going home this summer. I have to tell my mom and dad that I failed the court sorcerer exam in person." I forced a laugh. "I'll be in for a scolding."

Lisa seized both of my hands in hers. "Allen," she said with a gentle smile, "you have nothing to worry about. I know your parents."

"I've betrayed them," I answered slowly.

"You've done no such thing. If you were my own son, I would be proud of you from the bottom of my heart for what you did. I'm certain that your parents will feel the same. You defended my daughter's honor and for that I'm truly grateful. I, Lisa Leinster, will never forget your kind act for as long as I live."

"L-Lisa..." I said, startled.

She giggled. "I have to act like your mother-in-law once in a while. Don't tell Lydia, now."

"I... I won't," I conceded. I was no match for Lisa. I would go home with Caren, then I would tell mom and dad everything—face-to-face and in my own words.

"That reminds me, Allen. There's someone I want you to meet," Lisa said. "Anna."

"Yes, mistress," Anna chirped.

Someone she wants me to meet? Who can that be?

"E-E-Excuse me."

My eyes widened as a petite girl wearing glasses and the uniform of the Royal Academy entered, clutching her school beret in her hands. It was Felicia Fosse. There was a healthy flush across her pale cheeks.

"She's going to be helping with the Howards' and our business," Lisa informed me with a grin. "The Howards have already given their approval."

"J-Just like that?!" I stammered. "What about her health?"

"Leave that to me!" Anna interjected. "She will work here for the time being, and I will consult with the staff of the Howard residence as well."

I was speechless.

Miss Fosse giggled like a child who had just pulled off a successful prank. "You did say that you *wanted me*, Mr. Allen."

"I-I did, but I believe I also said 'after you graduate university.'"

"I couldn't wait. I'm going to withdraw from the Royal Academy after the end-of-semester exams."

"Wh-What?! B-But Miss Fosse—"

"Felicia," she corrected me.

I pressed a hand to my forehead. This girl was too reckless for her own good. I needed to talk some sense into her.

"Do you realize what that would mean?" I asked. "Withdrawing from the Royal Academy is tantamount to rejecting your own path to public success. A diploma would help you to—"

"My dad shouted that he 'couldn't let a little fool like me inherit his precious company,'" she replied, interrupting me. "My mom was more understanding, but...I'm going to leave home. I don't have to worry about the company—there are some old hands there, and the Leinsters have agreed to keep an eye on things."

I was flabbergasted; I could hardly believe what the sickly, bespectacled girl was saying. It was true that I'd wanted to see her create something wonderful—I had even seriously considered what she might do if given the space, position, and opportunity to work—but I'd had no intention of throwing her entire life off course.

Felicia's laughter cut my brooding short. "You don't play fair, Mr. Allen..."

"There's been a misunderstanding," I protested.

"But you are kind," she continued. "You're concerned about my future, even though we've only spoken to each other for a short time."

"Of course I'm concerned. Have you decided on a place to live?"

"I have a little money, so I'm thinking of someplace in the working district. Rent is cheap there."

"You're being reckless; the working district is no place for such a charming young lady to live. The streets aren't safe at night, you know. It won't be good for your health either."

Felicia let out an odd little squeak, and I could see her cheeks flushing redder and redder. I wondered why—she must have seen her own face in the mirror at some point.

"Th-That's not funny..." she mumbled, waving her hands. "Me, ch-charming? That's flattery if I've ever heard it."

"I was being sincere," I insisted. "You won't be living in the working district. I'll speak to Mr. Fosse and—"

"That won't be necessary," she replied before I could even finish speaking. "I'll make my own way, and I'll thank you to mind your own business."

"You're certainly stubborn."

"Isn't that part of what you like about me?"

I sighed. "You win. Please, use this fresh canvas to create something magnificent for me to behold."

"I promise to surpass your expectations," she replied.

I give up, I thought as I shook her small, girlish hand. *I misjudged her resolve, her passion, and her guts.*

"Would you find Felicia somewhere to live?" I asked Lisa, who had been observing our exchange.

"She'll stay here in the mansion," Lisa commanded. "Anna will have an easier time looking after her that way. I'll inform the Fosse Company."

So, she already has everything under control...

"Huh? What?!" Felicia exclaimed, suddenly in a panic. "I-I'm hardly worthy to live under the roof of the Ducal House of Leinster!"

"That won't do you any good, Miss Fosse," Anna interjected. "You see, Mr. Allen is quite strict. If we threw you out on the street, he would force us to model any number of outfits he hopes to dress Lady Lydia in, and that would be far from the end of it."

"Anna," I said, "would you mind me telling *her* you said that?"

"And there you have it," Anna concluded. "I suggest you resign yourself to taking up residence here." There was a certain playfulness to her voice; you could never be too careful with the Leinsters' head maid.

Felicia was squeezing her school beret, apparently unable to keep up with the situation. I approached her, eased the beret from her grip, then smoothed it out and set it on her head.

"M-Mr. Allen?" she stammered.

"Are you sure you won't regret leaving the Royal Academy?" I asked.

"I'm sure. I'm going to choose my own path."

"In that case, will you make me a promise?" I said, looking her in the eyes. She rarely spoke to boys at the Royal Academy—that was what Caren had told me—but she was so charming that I had to wonder whether those boys were merely unobservant. I decided that I would ask Anna to try some light makeup on her when I next had an opportunity. "Put your health first. Remember to eat and sleep. Don't take books or papers to bed with you. Learn to talk to boys like you can talk to me—you can take it slowly, but work on it a little bit at a time."

"M-Mr. Allen..." Felicia was visibly flustered. "Th-Th-That's..."

"If you can't keep that promise, then forget everything we've discussed," I said. "If you find it too difficult, I'll put a charm on you. And call me 'Allen' from now on."

Felicia was silent for a moment; then she said, "I'll do my best, Allen."

I turned to the head maid. "You heard her, Anna."

"Certainly, sir," she replied. "Hm... I seem to recall hearing those promises somewhere before."

I would have to keep them myself, otherwise Lydia and Caren would really lose their tempers soon. I was remembering to eat properly, but as for the rest... Well, one thing at a time.

"I wish you the best, Felicia," I said.

"Thank you! I'm setting out to get the capital's—no, the *kingdom's* commerce under my thumb!"

T-Talk about ambitious... Still, I'm glad she's so enthusiastic.

I bowed my head to the head maid, who was standing in attendance behind us, looking amused. "Mr. Allen?" she asked, startled by my gesture.

"It was only for a short time, but I was grateful for your assistance. The results we achieved in the past month and a half would have been impossible without you and the other maids from both ducal houses."

"I am but a humble maid," Anna replied hesitantly, "and it was we who imposed upon you."

"That's enough, Allen," Lisa interjected. "If you want to seduce my head maid, you'll need to defeat me first."

"I was being sincere."

Now, I think it's time to confront the greatest difficulty.

I made another bow to Lisa. "I pray that you have a safe journey. And if possible...I'd appreciate your assurance that I'll survive the night."

"A young man ought to fend for himself. She's on her way, you know."

"May fortune favor you, Mr. Allen," Anna added.

"Huh? Wh-What?" Felicia asked. "What's going to happen?"

"Keep behind me, Miss Fosse," Anna chirped. "I'm told you know your way around a sewing needle. Please have a look at this."

"Y-Yes, I do, but— Y-You're going to make this?!"

What a suspicious conversation. You'd better not drag her down any strange paths.

I unbuttoned my collar.

"Fortune's favor"? Yes, I'm going to need that. I suppose that my one stroke of luck is Lynne staying the night with the Howards—otherwise, I'd have two *birds to contend with.*

I prepared for the approaching storm as I sensed the wrathful mana radiating from the albatross around my neck.

*

It was just before curfew when the outer door of our dorm room opened to admit a dazed Felicia. "I-I'm back, Stella," she said.

"Welcome back," I replied. "Were you visiting your parents?"

"No, the Leinsters." Felicia let out a sigh. "I was so tense—maybe the tensest I've ever been in my life."

"The Leinsters?"

Felicia ignored my question as she flopped onto her empty bed and threw her arms around a pillow. "Stellaaa..." she called without changing her posture.

"Yes?" I answered mechanically, dropping my gaze to my notebook.

"Once the end-of-semester exams are over, I'm going to quit the Royal Academy."

"What?"

For a moment, I couldn't comprehend what she meant. My mind was awhirl. I repeated her words in my head: "I'm going to quit the Royal Academy."

"Wh-Why?!" I shouted—almost screamed—without meaning to. "You've worked so hard. If it's about your studies, then Caren and I can—"

"Thank you. That's not it, though. I do like magic, but even if I did make it to the university..."

Her resolve was firm. She was far smaller and frailer than me, but her mind was made up. I averted my eyes; her strength was too much for me.

"...I won't be a match for you or Caren," Felicia continued. "When it comes to business, however, I can hold my own against both of you. I can't spare the time to attend school. I've been given a place to work, and I doubt I'll ever get another chance like this one. That, and Mr. Allen believed in me."

She said that last part seemingly to herself and with just a hint of sweetness. My heart ached, but I gritted my teeth and concealed my inner turmoil.

"Y-Your parents won't allow it, will they?" I objected, feigning equanimity.

"My dad said that he'll disown me," Felicia confirmed. "For the time being, I'm going to be freeloading at the Leinster mansion while I study."

"O-Oh, I see... But isn't it awfully sudden to—"

"I'm back," came Caren's voice as she announced her return.

Felicia sprang out of bed and rushed toward her. "Oh, Caren! Listen to this!" she cried. "Allen and the Lady of the Sword put me through enough of their flirting for a lifetime! How am I supposed to believe they're not a couple after whatever *that* was?! It doesn't make sense! It really doesn't!"

"My brother and Lydia? And you dropped the 'Mr.'?" Caren asked with a look of confusion. "Felicia, have you made up your mind?"

"Yes! I'll quit the Royal Academy and go into business."

"You will?" Caren replied. "I'll miss you. Still, it might mean more peace and quiet for Stella and me; we won't have to worry about getting hugged out of nowhere, for one thing."

"Oh, you're awful!" Felicia exclaimed. "This is what that gets you!"

"F-Felicia, let go of me! Eek! O-Only Allen's allowed to touch my tail!"

As the pair began fooling around, a storm raged within me. Caren wasn't the least bit surprised that Felicia—the tiny girl who had always clung to me and needed my protection—had made up her mind to leave the Royal Academy. In fact, she was calmly and warmly encouraging her.

"Good luck," Caren said. "But don't forget about your health. I'll be upset if you collapse or something."

"Thank you! O-Oh, and don't worry!" Felicia replied, prompting a quizzical look from Caren. "I know my limits too well to set my sights on marrying Mr. Allen! I wouldn't have a prayer! I mean, I'd need to take on the Lady of the Sword, and that's not happening. Not a chance. I'm going to leave all that stuff to the rest of you and follow him at a distance—that'll give me a good view of all his achievements!"

Caren paused for a moment and then said, "Marrying him? I really don't see my brother like—"

"Oh? Don't you like Allen?"

"Of course! I love— F-Feliciaaa!"

"Have I put an idea in your head, Caren? You're adorable."

My best friends resumed their antics. I reached out a hand, hoping to join in, but I grasped only empty air and lowered it again.

"Stella?" Caren asked.

"Is anything wrong?" Felicia added.

"Oh, no," I replied. "You must both be tired, so let's turn in early. Do you mind?"

That night, the last of something inside me snapped. I couldn't stop it. *This... This isn't fair!* I shouted silently in the darkness. *How can you all forge ahead so easily? Doesn't moving forward scare you? What should I do—what* can *I do—to become like you?*

"Poor little me," my past self mocked me in the night. "Are you going to run away again? Still, what else can you do? After all..."

I flinched.

No. I mustn't listen.

"You're not the Lady of the Sword. You're not Caren. You're not Tina, or Lynne, or Ellie. You're not Felicia; she's sickly, frail, and shy, and she clung to you, but she's strong at heart."

I-I'm... I'm...

"Your name is Stella Howard, a poor little girl who lacks the talent to live up to her noble ancestry. Remember what father said? ‘There’s no chance that you’ll ever master Blizzard Wolf or the Azure Fists!’ And he was right, wasn’t he?”

The darkness was swallowing my body, and I saw only stygian gloom—a lightless expanse in which nothing was visible. I rose from my bed, slipped out of the cold room, and began walking along the corridor alone. I couldn’t make out anything around me, not even the light of the moon or stars.

Chapter 3

It was Waterday, still early in the week, and for once, I had nothing to do. I woke up early as usual nonetheless—habit was a force to be reckoned with.

The young woman beside me was sound asleep; she must have been the cause of the hand pain I'd experienced in my dreams. I gently touched her scarlet hair, then freed my hand and got out of bed without waking her. We'd had a long chat over red wine the night before, so I decided it was best to let her sleep in. It could be her turn to make breakfast next time.

Still, what had made her so insistent the previous night? "I'm sleeping with you in your bed tonight," she had declared. "If you try anything, I'll slice you up, incinerate you, and then slice you up again. I mean it!" She was also the one who had clasped my hand. I'd explained the situation with Felicia, but Lydia had ended up demanding affection like a spoiled child and had then fallen asleep before I did.

What made Lydia and Caren so averse to sleeping in the guest room? I'd even made a point of renting a house with space for one. And they were still prone to losing their tempers when I proposed moving to cheaper lodgings. It was admittedly difficult to argue with their position, which was: "That place was practically the haunted house of the working district when you moved in. Why would you move now that you've fixed it up?"

I would have liked to send more of my tutoring earnings back home, but Lydia and Caren wouldn't let me do that either. The pair had forced an allowance on me ever since my return to the royal capital, and they would lecture me whenever I failed to spend it all. I hardly considered that reasonable.

I completed my morning routine of practicing swordplay, unarmed combat, and magic in my small garden. Then, after changing my clothes, I reviewed my current circumstances while preparing breakfast in my kitchen. My job vetting business partners for the new exports was over, and it was a genuine weight off my shoulders. The sums of money that changed hands had been absurd, even at this experimental stage. I did manage a portion of Lydia's finances, but I was still an ordinary commoner, so the transactions of the two ducal houses were liable to give me a heart attack. For the sake of my future health, I wanted Felicia to fill that role—I would need to make certain that Anna and Mrs. Walker were clear on that point.

Being the girls' private tutor kept my weeks lively and my weekends boisterous but enjoyable. The approaching end-of-semester exams also helped to maintain a nice feeling of tension. I was hopeful that Ellie would master an advanced spell in time but less confident about Tina and Lynne, who would probably require a little while longer due to their surplus of mana. All three girls were struggling to match thirteen-year-old Lydia's casting speed, but I wanted them to keep trying—success would place them among the upper echelons of the kingdom's sorcerers.

The girls had made amazing progress in a few short months. I would need to put in more effort myself, otherwise there was a chance they would surpass me. They were incredibly rewarding to teach, although Caren would sulk if she heard me admit that. My adorable younger sister knew better than anyone that I was indulgent at heart, and she secretly wanted some of that indulgence for herself. In her own words, "Strictness is sometimes necessary—but not with me." She could be so awkward when it came to cries for affection.

The professor and headmaster were finally collaborating to decrypt the diary. Anko, meanwhile, had grown tired of their squabbling and was holed up in a seminar room. The first tidings of the familiar's plight had brought numerous deliveries of supplies from throughout the capital and from farther afield as well—Anko's paw-pularity far outstripped that of its master. I would need to pay my respects too.

As for the actual contents of the diary, they were apparently grim. I only hoped they would furnish some information on the great spells.

Apart from that... Well, there was Lady Stella. Her Highness was quite earnest—probably more earnest than was good for her—so her anxiety must have been getting to her. I realized that it was none of my business, but it also seemed a good idea for me to speak with her.

I chopped vegetables for a salad, arranged each portion individually, and then deposited them in my handmade icebox. Next, I cracked and scrambled several eggs before pouring them into a frying pan greased with warm butter. While I added cheese and went about shaping an omelet, I asked myself a question.

I failed to become a court sorcerer after working toward it for so long. I betrayed my parents' expectations, yet I haven't even managed to explain that to them in person. What now?

I flipped the omelet over and stirred the pot of soup simmering beside it, producing a delightful whiff of consommé.

Once summer vacation begins at the Royal Academy, I'll go home and tell them in my own words.

I tossed thick slices of bacon into an unoccupied section of the frying pan. The resulting aroma was wonderful.

And then what? Spend the rest of my life as a private tutor? I wouldn't become a noble, surely.

I would do everything in my power to teach the girls and to help them stand on their own. I would also find a way to control the great spell Frigid Crane to make doubly sure.

Ennoblement is out of the question, I decided as I shifted the bacon. So few commoners had risen to join the ranks of the nobility in the two hundred years since the War of the Dark Lord that I could count them on my fingers. To be frank, one would need to save the kingdom just to stand a chance. From what I recalled, the highest created title had been a viscountcy, and even that had only lasted for a generation. Its recipient had earned the honor by slaying a dragon—a member of the world's mightiest and most vicious species—that had assaulted the royal capital. In all honesty, attempting such a feat was suicidal. Even with the albatross and the Hero from the empire, I had barely managed to drive off one of those ruinous creatures. Above all, the kingdom was now, on the whole, at peace. Although the introduction of meritocracy was increasing the number of commoners working in the heart of government, it would be some time before any became nobles.

I like staying busy, so I'm sure I'll find something to keep me occupied a few years from now. I'll have to think about how much less time I'll spend with the albatross as— Ah, that turned out well. Time to wake her.

I turned off the flame, transferred the omelet and bacon to plates, prepared a basket of bread, and then returned to the bedroom. The albatross burrowed under the blankets as I entered, her scarlet hair gleaming in the morning light.

“Lydia,” I said, “breakfast is ready. Wash your face.”

“No way,” came her sulky reply. “I’m taking today off. I’ll go shopping in the capital with you later.”

“You can’t do that. You’re a court sorceress—and Her Royal Highness’s personal guard, at that.”

“The royal guard will take care of things while the ambassador’s around. You need to make me your top priority.” Lydia paused briefly before adding, “You’ve been taking me for granted lately. Do you *want* me to attack you seriously? And a real man would have tried something!”

“Your Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster, you’ve taken your jest too far. Now, get up.”

The willful noblewoman kicked and flailed on the bed. “You’re no fun!” she growled with evident displeasure. “No fun at all! That was your cue to say, ‘Your wish is my command, Mistress’!”

“Yes, yes.”

“Only one ‘yes’! Jeez!”

Lydia came to spend the night in my lodgings like this a few times every month. There was nothing sexual about it—we would chat over just a little bit of wine and she would eventually fall asleep mid-conversation. Besides which, I’d received a stern warning from Lisa. “Allen, nothing would please me more than to have you become my son,” she had said, “but you must hold firm until marriage. Lydia is naive and prone to losing control, so I’m counting on you.”

I wanted to make a retort. I couldn’t, but I wanted to.

To be perfectly honest, I was fond of the grumbling young lady wrapped up in my blankets. I couldn’t say if what I felt was “love” because—tragically—I had never dated anyone in all my seventeen years. Still, my feelings for her were the closest thing to it in my experience, and I deeply cherished them.

We had been through some terrifyingly intense experiences together over the past few years. If I included the incident with the Hero and the subsequent battle with the black dragon, I might even call her my other half. Had I ever wanted to part from her? Well, yes. A number of times. I didn’t have a death wish. Nevertheless, we were together. We *stayed* together.

But in my opinion, marriage was another matter. Lydia was the eldest daughter of a duke, and I was an orphan. Reforms were progressing thanks to the royal family championing meritocracy, but they wouldn't demolish the class barrier anytime soon. The chance of marriage between the albatross and me was near zero. Unless I were created a new duke, then someday—

The albatross sat up in bed, wrapped in a blanket. "You're brooding about nonsense, aren't you?" she demanded.

"No, I'm not."

"Who do you think you're fooling?! You dwell too much. Let your instincts take charge! And then— Eek!"

My eyes widened as Lydia placed her hands on her hips and stood up on the bed, allowing the blanket to fall. She was dressed only in one of my white shirts—she demanded one every time she stayed the night—meaning that below the waist she was...

I averted my eyes, and after an awkward silence, she posed an embarrassed question. "Did you see?"

"No," I replied. "I didn't see a thing. Now, it's time for breakfast."

"Oh, really? You're perceptive enough to block my sword, and you expect me to believe that?"

"May I say just one thing?"

"What?"

"You can never be too careful, even with me, so you might want to consider less alluring underwear."

"Prepare to d—! Wait, did you just call them 'alluring'?"

"Oh, I just remembered that I need to warm up the bread. Put something on before you get too chilly."

"H-Hang on! This conversation isn't over! Allen!"

I closed the door, cast a sound-dampening spell, and then beat a tactical retreat. My awareness that I was blushing had nothing to do with it, nor did the fact that Lydia looked so charming in just a shirt that I'd found it difficult to resist embracing her. It was a completely unrelated decision.

Around the time I finished warming up the bread, getting out the salads and some fruit-infused water, and setting the plates of omelets and bacon on the table, Lydia arrived dressed in shorts and my white shirt, which was too large for her. Why did she insist on wearing it when she would need to change later in any case? Her hair was still messy from lying in bed. It wasn't every day that I got to see her bangs standing up like this. Lynne had given me a look of confusion when I'd asked her about the very expressive nature of the albatross's hair, so there was a chance it was a secret to all but a few.

Lydia was smirking for all she was worth as she seated herself across from me. That had been my biggest slip of the tongue in months, and I couldn't let her rub salt in the wound.

"Good morning. Let's dig in," I said with feigned nonchalance. "Do you realize you have bed head?"

"Good morning," she replied. "Before we eat, would you answer me one question?"

"Time is of the essence, so try to be brief."

"Do you like scarlet?"

It took me a moment to respond. "I am a man, you know."

"I know. A man who loves me, right?"

"I won't answer that."

"Oh? Well, it doesn't matter. What's your favorite color?"

"C-Come on. The food will get cold."

"Yes, yes," Lydia chirped, earning a groan from me. She went on teasing me all through breakfast, and I suspected she would be enjoying herself at my expense for some time to come. I really had blundered.

We stood shoulder to shoulder as we brushed our teeth at the cramped washbasin, which only had a single cup, and then Lydia changed into her usual clothes. I was brushing her hair when there was a quiet knock on the front door.

"Who could that be this early in the morning?" I wondered aloud. "Lydia, I'm done straightening out your bed hair."

"Mmm..." she replied.

"Don't fall asleep, now."

"I won't."

Oh, honestly... She fully intended to go back to sleep, even though it would rumple her clothes. There was no time to dwell on that, however, as the knock was repeated.

"Yes, I'll be right there," I called as I hurried over. But when I reached the door, I found that it was already unlocked.

Hm?

Only one other person, apart from Lydia, had a duplicate key to my lodgings. I opened the door and admitted a wolf-clan girl in her school uniform—my younger sister Caren. She looked grim, and I could see that she had been crying. She wasn't wearing her beret or blazer, her ears lay flat, and her tail hung dispiritedly.

"Caren?" I asked. "What brings you here so early?"

"Allen!" she cried and flung herself at me.

"Whoa there," I said, hugging her. She trembled slightly and began to cry. I stroked her back and waited for her to calm down as her tears soaked my shirtfront.

"What happened...?" I asked softly.

After crying for a little while longer, Caren managed one word: "Stella."

"What about Lady Stella?"

"She's gone. Since the night before last." Caren paused and then added, "I waited for her with Felicia, but she didn't come back yesterday either. I said that she was strong—that she'd be fine—but I...I hurt her. If only I'd listened to her earlier..."

"Caren," I said, stroking her back as gently as I could so that my feelings would reach her. My sister appeared standoffish at first glance, but she cared for her close friends as deeply as anyone. The thought that she might have caused harm to one of them was making her miserable. "Don't worry. It's going to be all right."

"Allen... Thank you." She dug her fingers into my shirt and buried her face in my chest. As the student council vice president, she must have been putting on a brave face in the dormitory all this time.

Lydia had come up behind me. "And there you have it," I told her as I rubbed my sister's head. "I'm going out. Don't award yourself a holiday while I'm gone."

"Don't be an idiot," Lydia replied. "Caren, give him some space."

Caren looked up at me with eyes that said, "Allen, do I have to?" My sister was adorable—more adorable than anyone else in the whole wide world. I would neither abandon my duty as her older brother, nor would I submit to the albatross's threats.

"Can I ask you a few questions?" I said. "You haven't told Tina, Ellie, or Lynne, have you? Is Felicia at the academy?"

"I haven't told them," she replied. "They came to see her yesterday, but I said she had a cold. I gave the academy the same excuse. Stella is—"

The sounds of ungainly running cut her short as a bespectacled girl dressed in a school uniform and with long, unkempt hair arrived in the entryway, panting heavily. No sooner had she arrived than she rested her hands on her knees and began gasping and heaving. I was unsure where it was safe to look.

"C-Caren," she wheezed, "d-don't just leave me behind like that! A-Are you trying to stop my weak heart mentally *and* physically?! I can't afford to die while— Is this a bad time?" One look at my sister with her arms around me and the albatross behind us appeared to have told her all she needed to know.

"If your heart stops, I'll bring you back with my lightning magic," Caren replied. "And are you sure you want to talk like that in front of my brother?"

"A-Allen!" the girl exclaimed, startled.

"Don't let it bother you, Felicia," I said. "Do you have any idea where Stella might be?"

Felicia lowered her head and clenched her little hands. "None," she replied in a trembling voice. "I thought of the Howard mansion, but Tina and her friends haven't mentioned her."

"I see. I'll follow up on some guesses of my own."

"Th-Then let us go with you!"

"You both have classes to attend. And you, Felicia"—I reached out a hand and lightly tapped her forehead with my index finger, causing her to stagger—"need to take care of yourself. Don't forget our promise."

"...All right," she muttered, pressing a hand to her forehead. Caren gave me a look that asked, "What promise?" but I waved my hand to deflect the question.

"I'll let you know when I find her," I promised them. "Allow me to see to this for the time being."

Both girls fell silent. Felicia then nodded, and Caren soon followed suit in my arms. "Please," she said, "save our best friend. Lydia, you stayed the night, didn't you? You ought to show more awareness of your position as Duke Leinster's daughter. That kind of behavior is strictly forbidden."

"Excuse me?!" Lydia snapped. "He's mine, and I'm— Let go of him already!"

"Don't pretend you didn't sleep in Allen's bed, wearing one of his shirts for a nightgown."

Lydia flushed bright red while her mouth flapped wordlessly. Caren was sulking. I could never tell if they were friends.

The moment I let go of Caren, she and Lydia prepared for battle with me stuck in between them. They gripped the hilts of their dagger and sword, respectively, and deployed a dozen or more spell formulae. Did they realize they would demolish the house if they cut loose here?

Felicia turned pale. "I-I knew I didn't stand a chance..." she muttered enigmatically. I couldn't strain the sickly young woman's heart, so I intervened in the spell formulae and dismantled them with a snap of my fingers.

"There's a time and a place for these things," I warned the pair somewhat sternly.

"Caren started it," Lydia protested.

"I think you bear a lot of the blame, Allen," Caren replied almost simultaneously.

"Lydia, go to the palace," I said. "You're running late. Caren, Felicia, return to the academy—and don't forget to let the girls and the staff know that the student council president will be absent again."

*

A groan escaped me as I woke to dazzling rays of morning sunshine through the white-framed windows. What time was—

I bolted upright and turned to the side. "Caren, Felicia!" I cried. "This is awful! We oversle—"

There was no sign of my best friends, who would ordinarily have replied, "I'll make it with time to spare. What will we do about breakfast?" and "Stella, Caren, feel free to leave me behind." My mind was cooling down.

That's right. I slipped out of the dormitory the day before yesterday and—

Someone knocked. It was probably Shelley.

I burrowed under the blankets and shut my eyes tight. My feelings wouldn't change. I couldn't decide anything on my own, anyway; the most I could do was lie here and mope. Maybe getting expelled wouldn't be so bad. I could leave my name in the annals of the Royal Academy—the expulsion of a girl who was both the daughter of a duke and the student council president would be an unprecedented disgrace. My heart quailed at the mere thought of it. What would I tell my father? He was sure to be furious.

Caren's, Felicia's, Tina's, and Ellie's faces seemed to loom behind my eyelids. I retreated deeper under the blankets.

Stop it! Don't look at me like that! I… I'm not gifted like you are. I can't go on, and I can't make up my mind either. I can't take so much as a single step forward. I did manage to when I enrolled in the Royal Academy, but…I'm too frightened now. Just leave me alone. I-I'm…

"So, this is the Howards' villa," a quiet voice said not far off. "It's much larger than I pictured it would be. That said, it's just like Mrs. Walker to keep it in perfect repair, even when it's not in use."

What? H-How?!

I had locked the doors and windows and even sealed them for good measure with multiple layers of the strongest barrier spell that I could muster. I peered out from under my blankets and saw a young man with light-brown hair and kind eyes.

"Good morning," he said.

"G-Good morning, Mr. All— I mean, how did you get in here?!"

"Through the entrance. Mrs. Walker told me where to find the villa."

I was speechless. My barriers were only a matter of steps away, but I hadn't even noticed him breach them. "Do you have some business with me?" I asked, making an effort to sound cold. "I won't go to school, and I have nothing to say to you."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?"

"No. You're lying."

I bit my lip, and my tears came spilling out. He had seen through absolutely everything. I *was* lying. I'd known that my dear best friends would search everywhere for me when they realized I was missing, and that was why I had retreated to this long-disused villa. Every ducal house owned several in and around the royal capital, and this particular one was known only to Shelley and a few others—not even Tina and her friends knew about it. Caren and Felicia had no opportunities to meet the Howards' head maid, so what would they do? To whom would Caren turn first?

It was a dirty trick. I can't believe I'm so cowardly.

I hadn't even been able to approach him myself. Instead, I had abused my best friends' kindness to summon him here.

Mr. Allen sat down on the bed. "You wanted to ask me something, didn't you?" he said. "There's no one here but us, so you won't be overheard."

I'd wanted those words—wanted them for such a long time—but I was still too weak to reply. I couldn't guess how much time passed before I finally managed a feeble, “Mr. Allen.”

“Yes?” he replied.

“Didn’t it bother you? Lady Lydia is extraordinary. So are you, but...when you lectured at the Royal Academy, you said that you can’t cast advanced spells. You must have suffered a lot of mockery and insults because of that. Didn’t you want to get away from people more extraordinary than you were?”

“Hm...” He considered my questions for a moment. “I’m ashamed to admit this, but it’s true that being with her has earned me more than my fair share of unpleasant remarks.” His tone was relaxed, and I could tell that he was genuinely smiling at his own folly.

“Then...”

“But I’ve never thought of leaving her because of that,” he declared without hesitation. He was nothing like me. I could sense the deep, deep darkness drawing nearer. “On the other hand, I don’t know whether that was the right choice.”

“...What?” I looked up at Mr. Allen. There was a tinge of loneliness in his smile.

“Her Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster, is undeniably a genius. She’s the strongest, most noble, and most beautiful person I’ve ever met. I’ve wondered whether I really have anything to contribute to her growth.”

“B-But,” I protested, “the two of you complement each other perfectly.”

“She’s ‘Her Highness, Lady Leinster,’ and I’m ‘an orphan raised by animals.’”

I gasped.

“There are some things that the eldest daughter of a great noble and the adopted son of a wolf-clan couple just can’t talk to each other about,” he continued. “There’s been a lot that I couldn’t say even to her. But at the same time, it’s true that I don’t have status, authority, or even much mana.”

“I’m sorr—”

“Don’t be,” Mr. Allen said before I could finish my apology. There was conviction in his voice. “I consider myself very fortunate that my parents took me in. I got an adorable little sister out of it, for one thing. And while there are plenty of people more exceptional than me out there, and countless people with more mana, that doesn’t mean I won’t make an effort. My mom always told me, ‘Do your best, try to smile, and be kind to your friends and family! But remember: you don’t need to compare yourself to other people.’”

It took me a long moment to reply. “You’re strong, Mr. Allen. I could never live like that. After all...” Tears obscured my vision. I tried to wipe them away, but they refused to stop. I gritted my teeth and shouted, “Caren is really, really amazing! I can’t measure up to her at anything! But because she’s beastfolk and not a noble, she couldn’t be student council president...and the honor fell to me—just because I’m ‘Her Highness, Lady Stella Howard, the future Duchess Howard’!”

I was vomiting out the pitch-dark feelings that had been building up inside of me for so long.

“And although Felicia is physically frail, she’s really, truly strong at heart,” I went on. “She chooses her own path, and she sticks to it, even if doing so leads her through a wasteland. That’s who she is, although I never noticed it. I could never resolve to quit the Royal Academy for my own future like she did...”

The darkness was engulfing my heart. I needed to stop. This was wrong. And yet...

“Even Ellie and Lynne clearly have more talent for swordplay, martial arts, and magic than I do. I doubt that I could defeat them now. They might even graduate ahead of me—I don’t have the energy to attend class, for one thing.”

It was no use. Once the words had started to spew from my mouth, I couldn’t stop them. My contempt for myself tore at my heart.

“And my little sister Tina has mastered Blizzard Wolf, a supreme spell. She was scorned as ‘the Howards’ cursed child’! She couldn’t cast a single spell! But she still managed it, while I couldn’t even begin to figure it out. Our father must now consider her his successor, even though there’s nothing else I can do with my life. All of my hard work was for nothing.”

My voice began to dwindle with exhaustion toward the end. I hung my head, slumped forward, and covered my face with my hands.

“When I see what Lady Lydia is capable of, it’s hard to believe that we both come from ducal houses,” I croaked. “She’s like...like one of the heroes in the fairy tales, who wielded their great spells to save the world. And I’ll have to face her as an equal someday. I can't do it. It's just impossible."

The Lady of the Sword and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword—I had idolized them both. My heart had leapt at every fresh report of their exploits. When I had witnessed their power for myself, however…it had been far beyond anything I'd imagined. Too far beyond. And at that moment, I couldn't help but realize something.

My body trembled. My tears refused to stop. Everyone around me was bursting with talent. They all had bright futures ahead of them. But me? There was nothing in my future but deep darkness.

"I… I don't know…what I should do anymore."

Oh. I said it.

I hadn't complained to anyone since my mother passed away. I was Stella Howard, the future Duchess Howard and the dependable president of the Royal Academy's student council—whining like this was entirely inappropriate.

Silence filled the room. Mr. Allen must have been disgusted with me, and who could blame him? I was pathetic. But to my surprise, what I heard next was…the sound of clapping.

"Lady Stella."

I looked up to find Mr. Allen wearing his usual smile. I was disconcerted; why did he look happy?

"What would you say to skipping class today and joining me on a date in the city?" he said.

"…Huh?" My mind froze and then thawed a few moments later.

H-Hang on! Why?!

My head was spinning. I glanced around, but there was no one else in the room.

With me*?*

"I'll let Caren and Felicia know as well," Mr. Allen added. He conjured two little jade-green birds in midair, and they alighted on his hand. He then approached a window and flung it open, admitting an early-summer breeze. The birds rubbed their heads against Mr. Allen's hand, then spread their wings and flew outside. "Now, shall we be on our way?" he asked me.

"M-Mr. Allen?! Eep! Um…" I stammered in disbelief as he scooped me up in his arms and my blanket fell away.

Oh. Men really do have large hands, even when they're so slender… Wait a second! I-I'm still in my nightgown, and my hair is a mess! I-I can't go out looking like this!

"Please hold on tight," Mr. Allen warned me as he approached the window, ignoring my agitation.

"Huh? What? What?!"

An instant later, Mr. Allen was soaring through the air with me in his arms. I held on to him tightly—he was warm—and shut my eyes.

We're not falling?

I waited and waited, but the sensation of descent never came. I opened my eyes, and a cry of surprise escaped me. Mr. Allen was walking on air—or on sturdy vines that ran through it, to be precise.

Botanical magic?! But only a select few beastfolk can use that!

I looked down, saw people passing below us, and flinched.

"You're so light, Lady Stella," Mr. Allen remarked with a cheerful air. His smile made him look younger than he was. "Are you getting enough to eat? Let's gorge ourselves at a delicious restaurant later. I've cast a perception-blocking spell, so they can't see us."

I groaned. He was so mean—just like Tina had told me in all of her letters!

"We need to get you something to wear," he continued. "Although, if you'd rather remain in your nightgown, I won't object."

We spent a moment in silence and then I said, "Please allow me to change."

"But you look lovely already."

I beat my fists on Mr. Allen's arm in exasperation. Before I knew it, my heavy heart had grown a little bit lighter.

*

I did a twirl before the room's full-length mirror, taken aback by my own unfamiliar appearance. My hair was down for a change—I had left my keepsake ribbon behind—but it was my clothing that seemed most out of place. Since coming to the royal capital, I had spent the majority of my time in my school uniform, and the casual clothes that I very occasionally bought consisted entirely of shirts and pants that were easy to move in. I was ill at ease in feminine clothes, so the white dress and pale-azure cardigan I was dressed in felt wasted on me.

"You look lovely, Lady Stella."

"Shelley..." I said slowly, turning to see the familiar face of my house's elderly head maid. She was a calm, levelheaded woman, but her eyes were red with weeping. I had exchanged letters with her, but now that I saw her in the flesh again, I thought that she might have more gray in her hair.

I'd known that Shelley had accompanied Tina and Ellie to the royal capital, but I had lacked the courage to visit the Howard mansion until two days prior, when I had ungratefully shown up in the middle of the night. Shelley had welcomed me with tears in her eyes and even allowed me to use the villa without telling Tina and Ellie.

Shelley, her husband Graham, and the rest of the Howard servants had made certain that Tina and I were loved—truly loved—after my mother's passing. They had done so much to save us. In spite of that, I had argued with my father and then fled the mansion without so much as a word to them. I had been able to cover my tuition to the Royal Academy using my mother's money—she had bequeathed her fortune to Tina and me, giving us half each—but I had known too little of the world. In the end, Shelley and Graham had come to my aid, just as they had when I was little.

I'm the worst kind of ingrate.

I dismissed the thought with an exaggerated shake of my head and then returned my attention to Shelley. "You don't have to sugarcoat it," I said.

"I'm doing nothing of the kind!" she replied. "You're positively radiant. I almost mistook you for the mistress—for Duchess Rosa."

"Thank you, although I'm not pretty like my mother was."

A reserved knock caused me to stiffen and check the mirror. My hair was untangled, and I had gotten Shelley to erase the signs of my crying with a combination of magic and makeup. I looked...fine. At least, I hoped that I did. Maybe I should have put more effort into my appearance.

"Lady Stella, Mrs. Walker, may I come in?" a voice asked from outside.

"Wait—"

Before I could protest, Shelley interrupted me with a brisk, "You may."

"Excuse m—" Mr. Allen stepped into the room and then froze the moment he laid eyes on me. Perhaps the clothes really didn't suit me, after all.

“Mr. Allen, please give us your opinion,” Shelley said with evident delight.

“Huh?” Mr. Allen replied. “Oh, excuse me. I couldn’t take my eyes off you, Lady Stella. You look stunning.”

“Th-Thank you,” I replied awkwardly and turned my back to him. I didn’t recognize myself in the mirror, and the sound of approaching footsteps made my heart beat faster.

I must be crazy to skip school for something like this.

A white cloth hat was placed on my head. “This should keep anyone from recognizing you while we’re out and about,” Mr. Allen said. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Walker.”

“I merely carried out my duty as a maid,” Shelley replied. “I hope that you’ll dine here tonight.”

“What?” I said, flustered. “I-I’m—”

“We’ll be back by nightfall,” Mr. Allen interrupted, exchanging silent nods with Shelley. I evidently had no say in the matter.

Between this exchange and the events at the villa, it appeared that Shelley had a great deal of faith in Mr. Allen. He must have done more in the north than Tina had written to me about in her letters.

“Now, shall we be on our way?” Mr. Allen said to me. “Mrs. Walker, would you send messages to the girls, my sister Caren, Lady Stella’s friend Felicia, and Lydia, inviting them to dine here? I doubt I’ll live to see tomorrow unless I return to explain matters to them.”

*

The royal capital was one of the largest cities on the continent, and it attracted people and goods not only from throughout the kingdom, but from neighboring countries as well. That was especially obvious of late, now that meritocracy was permeating the lowest levels of society. The working district on the city’s northern side was thronged with immigrants from far and wide—those who hailed from the nations of the southern isles being particularly conspicuous—all out to make a name for themselves. The area was also home to many restaurants that served delicious food at low prices—not that I could take Lady Stella to them. It was hardly the safest part of the capital.

“Here you are,” I said, passing a frozen treat to the girl sitting on a bench. Mine was made with frozen milk, while hers contained seasonal fruits. “I’m certain you’ll love it.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” Her Highness replied.

It was early afternoon, and we were in the plaza surrounding the great fountain in the city center. The space was lined with street stalls and branches of cafés, among which crowds of people came and went. I saw humans, beastfolk, elves, dwarves... The only notable race not represented was the giants, whose massive bodies would have obstructed the considerable carriage traffic on the road.

It felt good to sit back and survey the scene over an icy sweet. I even thought that I spotted a familiar café waitress, but I must have imagined it.

“Mr. Allen,” Lady Stella said.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Do you often visit restaurants like this?”

“I do, thanks to the professor’s epicurean tastes. That’s also how I discovered the restaurant we lunched at earlier.”

“The food there was delicious. It reminded me of home.”

“They cook with northern vegetables and use northern liquor as their secret ingredient. Their portions could be larger, though.”

“You think so? I couldn’t have eaten another bite.”

“Oh? Then how do you explain the bites you’re taking out of that dessert?”

“W-Well...” Her Highness faltered. She looked picture-perfect with her long hair fluttering in the breeze, and her fine figure was equally eye-catching. All the passersby—men and women alike—were pausing to stare at her, entranced. Lady Stella herself was oblivious to it all. Ignorance could be cruel.

“I spent all my time on study or training, so I never even realized that places to eat like these existed,” she said. “I don’t know the capital’s famous sights either.”

“Then let’s make a round of them,” I replied. “We can resupply with dessert as needed en route.”

Lady Stella pouted and gave me a whack with one of her little hands. She was older than Tina, but I thought she might be even more adorable—especially as Tina was quick to fire off a Blizzard Wolf of late. That behavior was something I would need to set right; one person acting like that was more than enough for me.

“Why don’t we start by picking out tributes—excuse me, gifts—at the bazaar and then making a courtesy call?” I suggested.

No sooner had we entered the university office than a black mass launched itself at Lady Stella. I captured it in midair—its hairs would stand out on a white dress.

“Mind your manners, Anko,” I said. “Lady Stella, this is Anko, the professor’s familiar.”

“Oh, yes. I know.”

“Ah, of course. That rotten—*ahem*, the professor is a close associate of Duke Walter and Duke Liam Leinster. I believe he stayed with your family during long vacations?”

“Really, Allen...” the professor said and then waved a greeting without leaving his chair. “Why hello, Lady Stella. It’s good to see you.” Lydia’s and my former teacher was still a gentleman of scholarly appearance, but his cheeks had grown slightly more haggard, and a few more gray hairs stood out on his head. His desktop had gone to ruin.

“It’s been too long,” Lady Stella replied. She paused for a moment and then added, “Are you in poor health?”

Meanwhile, I presented my gift to Anko.

The professor pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh,” he groaned, “you’re the only one who’s asked after my health! Not one of my students has! The worst of them has even attempted to force a...a *bride* on me! He’s frustrated to be seeing Lydia so much less often, and he’s taking it out on yours truly. Does that strike you as fair?”

My former teacher was busy filling Lady Stella’s head with lies while I watched Anko sink its teeth into my tribute of dried fish from the city of water, so I decided to set the record straight.

“Do you have any more to say?” I interjected. “I believe that the Howards and Leinsters both still have candidates for you to consider. I *also* seem to recall a certain professor taking the lead in setting me up for a stress-inducing job vetting business partners...”

“Now, it’s not every day that I see the two of you together.” The professor wrenched the conversation onto another track, presumably having determined that the odds were against him. “What brings you to— Don’t tell me you’re two-timing Lydia?! Be sensible, Allen! Are you trying to reduce the capital to a sea of flames?!”

“Professor,” I replied slowly, “even I am only willing to put up with so much.”

"Can't you take a joke? I assume you have your reasons, and skipping school every once in a while isn't such a bad thing. I had my share of good times out and about in my student days."

"We've come to visit Anko in its hour of need," I said, stroking the magnificent familiar as it gnawed on the dried fish. "I'd heard that it was holed up and besieged, but it appears that you've reached an arrangement."

Lady Stella was looking around the office and exclaiming in delight at the books she found.

"And you've brought nothing for me?" the professor said pointedly.

"Oh, but I have—I tried those frozen desserts in the central fountain plaza."

This intelligence caught his attention. "And how were they?"

"In conclusion, they were excellent."

The professor grinned, and so did I. Sharing information about delicious food and the places that served it was a department tradition—nay, an ironclad law.

Good food should be enjoyed by all!

"We bought Anko's gift at the bazaar on our way here," I added. "It was an entertaining experience; sellers hawking their wares wasted no time latching on to Lady Stella, and we had no end of trouble when—"

"M-Mr. Allen?! I-I told you to keep that between us!" Lady Stella cried, clamping her hands over my mouth with astonishing speed. A swaying lock of her bangs reminded me of Tina, while her panic was more like Ellie. I preferred this side of her to her usual imperturbable self. I gave her hand a light tap, at which point she released me, lowered the brim of her hat, and started twiddling her fingers.

The professor let out a laugh. "Stella *is* eye-catching," he remarked. "And I've yet to fully explore the bazaar."

"Another reason for you to finish that decryption," I replied.

"Believe me, I'm well aware of that. Even as I weep day and night at the way my students treat me and restrain my urge to murder that supremely twisted old elf, I deny myself the pleasure of my little epicurean expeditions so that I may slave away—"

"We're planning to visit the cathedral later. Are there any nearby eateries you recommend?"

After a moment of affronted silence, the professor replied, "Don't you think you're asking too much of me, Allen? And there's a café that serves delectable crepes on your way to the cathedral. You can even eat them while you walk."

"We'll stop by. Oh, by the way—I saw Gil."

"So I heard. I narrowly avoided being put on trial by my own students. I only managed to save my skin by tipping off the others about your meeting. Now, about Gil..." The professor's expression grew troubled—unusual for a man who was generally causing trouble for others. "He's caught up in something worrying. That said, it's neither your business nor mine at present."

"You mean it involves his house?"

"Sh-Should I step outside?" Lady Stella asked.

"You're the future Duchess Howard," the professor replied. "You needn't worry."

"Of course..."

Professor! Show some sensitivity! Or was that deliberate? Of course it was; that's just like you.

"I shouldn't have to tell you that the present Duke Algren, whose house defends the east of our kingdom, is an old man. Over the past few years, people have begun to discuss succession, and the duke's four sons are all in the running."

"Including Gil?" I asked. "I doubt anyone would give him their support; he's the youngest son and a student besides."

"I'm told that he's favored by the duke himself, but the ducal houses have adhered to primogeniture since the War of the Dark Lord. There's trouble on the horizon."

Lady Stella stiffened. I almost put a hand on her shoulder but stopped myself—it was a trap. The professor's cheerful smile was silently urging me to comfort her. Damn the rotten old man! Then again, there was probably more to this than malice. The professor was a firm friend to—and bad influence on—Dukes Walter Howard and Liam Leinster.

"You're the future Duchess Howard," is it? Duke Walter can be so indirect. I wish he would tell her himself.

"Gil may be gifted, but I'm not certain he wants the honor," I told the professor.

"I agree, but the issue is Duke Algren's other sons. They're reasonably capable, but they're all staunch champions of aristocratic privilege and don't care who knows it. Rumor even linked them to Gerard—Duke Algren offered to oversee the prince's confinement in order to quash that gossip. The old duke's devotion to His Majesty is beyond doubt, so he must have misgivings about the succession."

Aristocratic society is so much trouble. Thank goodness I'm an ordinary citizen.

I gave Anko a pet and then checked my pocket watch. My former underclassmen were due to arrive soon.

"Well then, Professor, we'll be on our way," I said. "Lady Stella."

"All right..."

Look what you've done—she's depressed. What? You want me to put an arm around her shoulders? I won't fall for that.

Anko floated into the air and licked Lady Stella's hand, eliciting a little squeak from the young woman. "Anko says for you to cheer up," I told her. "Now, let's get going. Sweet crepes await us."

The towering Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, which stood on a hill on the outskirts of the capital's western district, had a long history. In contrast to the majority of the kingdom's architecture, which had been constructed in the two hundred years since the War of the Dark Lord, the cathedral was estimated to be more than five centuries old. Despite its age and the ivy that covered it, the building's exterior had been maintained in pristine condition, and it was still used for Lightday religious services—both, I supposed, testaments to piety. Religious fervor was not strong in the kingdom, but the cathedral was still the largest building in the city, excluding the royal palace. Those in the Pontiff's Domain—the church's homeland—and the famously devout empire might be even more impressive.

Although it was growing late, many people from abroad were silently praying to the steeple. Lady Stella was surveying our surroundings with interest as she nibbled on her crepe.

"Mr. Allen?" she asked. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing at all," I replied. "Lady Stella, please don't move."

"What? M-Mr. Allen? U-Um, well..."

I wiped her mouth with my handkerchief. "There, that does it. You had a bit of cream on your face."

"Th-Thank you," she replied, evidently flustered, and then began wolfing down the remainder of her crepe. She was apparently fond of sweet things but hadn't indulged this fondness much because they were “f-fattening”—although I’d found her light as a feather—and she had never spent her pocket money on sweets before. She looked a lot like Tina at times like this.

“Th-Thank you for waiting for me to finish,” she said. “Um...”

“Let’s take a look inside. It’s quite crowded here.” I offered her my hand, but she stared at it and froze.

Was that overfamiliar of me? I see a lecture from Caren in my future.

“Forgive me,” I said, withdrawing my hand. “I suppose that was impertinent.”

“Oh, n-not at all.” Lady Stella’s gaze wandered back and forth between her hand and mine for a moment; then, she timidly extended her own hand and gasped when I gently took it. This side of her reminded me of Ellie.

“We still have time, so let’s enjoy ourselves,” I said.

“Huh? T-Time until what?” she asked.

“That’s a surprise. I hope you’ll like it.”

Lady Stella pouted to show her displeasure but still gave my hand a squeeze. She must have looked after Tina and Ellie quite a lot during her time at the Howard mansion; I could catch glimpses of both girls in her.

“They don’t sell sweets here,” I noted. “You’ll have to wait for dinner to enjoy more dessert.”

“I-I wasn’t hoping for any! N-Now, let’s go,” Lady Stella said and dragged me along after her.

She seems a little more cheerful now, I thought as I touched the object in my pocket and reminded myself to give it to her later.

“Oh, wow... It’s *gorgeous*.”

The first thing that caught our eyes once we were inside the cathedral was a massive stained glass window that transformed the rays of evening sunlight streaming through it into a blaze of color. The faithful were individually reciting scripture before their sacred symbol. The design set into the main window represented the Church of the Holy Spirit’s doctrine—a scene of the Holy Spirit returning to heaven after its work saving the people was done, or so I seemed to recall. My memory was hazy.

The stained glass that attracted my attention every time I visited adorned little round windows above the main one, up near the ceiling. There were eight of them, and each depicted a human casting a spell. I recognized four, but none resembled Frigid Crane, Blazing Qilin, or the spell that Tina had told me of, Tempest Kingfisher.

“Those are the great spells, aren’t they?” Lady Stella casually remarked. “Let me see... Starting from the far right, I think they’re Thunderbolt, Falling Star, Resurrection, Radiant Shield, Blaze of Ruin, Watery Grave, Quake Array, and Dividing Wind.”

I stared at the young noblewoman in astonishment. What had those last four names been?

Lady Stella looked puzzled, then blushed and lowered the brim of her hat. “P-Please don’t stare at me like that, Mr. Allen. Did I get it wrong?”

“Lady Stella,” I said, “who told you those last four names?”

“My mother taught them to me. She used to tell me, ‘The heroes of old commanded incredible magic! Their spells are forgotten now, but they were quite real.’”

“I see... Your mother taught you.”

Once again, I had come up against Duchess Rosa Howard. There were no surviving documents worth speaking of, and to my knowledge, even picture books only showed four of the great spells. How had she obtained information that I had been unable to learn after years of searching the professor’s books and the Leinsters’ and Howards’ archives?

“Mr. Allen?” Lady Stella asked.

“Please hear me out,” I said, “and try not to laugh.”

“All right.”

“I became interested in magic because I admired the pictures of ancient heroes using great spells in storybooks. The world regards them as fairy tales, but I’m still researching them.”

I almost mentioned Tina’s situation but stopped myself; Lady Stella had enough on her plate without the sudden revelation that her younger sister was host to a being that seemed to be Frigid Crane and had been impeding her spellcasting.

Lady Stella squeezed my hand tighter. “I believe in them too,” she said. “My mother told me about them, and I used to dream of casting a great spell myself. I also thought that ‘supreme magic’ sounded more powerful than ‘great magic.’” The young noblewoman giggled.

Like sister, like sister. They were the same at heart. I patted her head—or rather, her hat—as the sun set and mana lamps lit up inside the cathedral.

"M-Mr. Allen?" Lady Stella asked, startled.

"I'm in your debt," I said. "I've just learned the names of more great spells. Allow me to show you a secret spot of mine by way of thanks."

"E-Explain yourself. I demand an explanation!"

"Not so loud, Lady Stella." I put a finger to my lips to shush her, and she responded by giving me a sullen look and turning her head to one side.

I took out my pocket watch. We were going to be late unless we got moving.

"Now, allow me to escort you," I said. "Please don't tell anyone else about this, all right?"

The sun had set by the time we exited the cathedral, but the area around it was still crowded. Talk about piety. We entered an alley beside the building, where I cast perception-blocking and sound-dampening spells on us.

"Mr. Allen?" Lady Stella said, confused.

"Would you hold your hat in your hands and close your eyes?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Please."

"Wh-What? Um, well... I-I'm..."

Oh! Now, there's a funny face. Tina's been too wary to show me any lately; she must have gotten wise to my tricks.

"Get ready," I said.

"Huh? Oh, a-all right!" Lady Stella hurriedly removed her hat and shut her eyes tightly, seeming far more tense than the situation merited. I gently wrapped an arm around her waist, much to her apparent surprise.

"Don't worry," I said. "Please relax. It'll be over before you know it."

"O-Okay..."

I glanced around—just to be safe—and saw that we were alone. *Good.*

I controlled the ivy with a botanical spell and lifted us to the rooftop in a single bound. The light breeze felt wonderful as I seized hold of a flagpole and conjured several small, floating lights in the air.

"Mr. Allen?!" Lady Stella cried, evidently alarmed.

"You can open your eyes now, but please don't panic."

"All right." Lady Stella opened her eyes and then gasped. She let go of my hand, possibly in surprise, so I wrapped an arm around her.

"Whoa there. Here, grab hold of this," I said, taking out a handkerchief and wrapping it around the flagpole as a handhold for her.

"Th-Thank you very much," she replied weakly.

Below us was an enchanting view of the royal capital at night. The city lights were on, the moon was rising, and the stars overhead had begun to twinkle.

"It's... It's beautiful..." the girl said, gasping in admiration. "I've never seen anything like it."

"'On nights when you can't sleep, be very quiet and watch the moon and stars. Then, the elementals will show you the way. There's nothing to fear.'"

"What?"

"That was written in a picture book that my mother read to me a long time ago," I continued, making sure to keep my gaze facing forward. "I think it was about the Saint and the Magician. I never forgot it. I still come here alone to watch the moon and stars when I feel down, although I've never met an elemental."

"Alone?" Lady Stella repeated. "Never with Lydia, or Caren, or...with Tina and her friends?"

"No one else knows about it. You're the first person I've told."

"I...see..."

I smiled at the girl in my arms. "People call me the Brain of the Lady of the Sword. It's an impressive nickname, but I'm nothing special. Unlike the Hero from the empire or the Lady of the Sword herself, I doubt I'll ever fulfill my childhood dream of becoming a storybook hero. Still, I want to see them."

"What do you want to see?"

For the first time, Lady Stella and I looked straight into each other's eyes.

"I'm confident that, in the near future, they'll inscribe their names in the annals of history," I said. "As will Caren, Felicia, Tina, Ellie, and Lynne. I want to see that happen, and to ensure that, I need at least enough strength to stay with them without dying. That's why I keep struggling to improve, even if only a little bit at a time. Here."

Lady Stella's eyes widened as I took a sky-blue ribbon from my pocket.

"I had one of my little birds fetch it," I explained. "It's a memento of your mother, isn't it?"

I handed the ribbon to Lady Stella, and she immediately clutched it to her chest. A short while later, she spoke my name. "Mr. Allen."

"Yes?"

"I've made up my mind. So... So, would you be willing to...help me?”

Her eyes were wavering, but there was determination in their depths. I expected no less from Tina and Ellie’s older sister and Caren’s best friend. This awkward young lady had the courage to stand up and move forward; she just needed a little support.

“Of course, Your Highness, Lady Stella Howard,” I emphatically replied.

*

“A-A duel?!” The startled shouts of the girls who had been eagerly awaiting our return filled the drawing room of the Howard mansion. Lydia followed them with a reserved, “Well now.”

“Yes,” Lady Stella replied to Tina, Ellie, and Lynne. Her ribbon was in her hair, and she was without hesitation.

Lydia was quietly observing from her seat, while Lynne looked troubled. Felicia was nowhere to be seen, although she had been present mere moments earlier. What had she been wearing a Howard maid uniform for?

Lady Stella’s long hair glistened as she bowed her head deeply. “I apologize for making you worry,” she said, “but I’ve made up my mind. I can’t continue on—can’t progress—as things are. Please, face me with swords and spells.” She then raised her head to look at Tina, Ellie, and Caren, all of whom were shaken.

“S-Stella,” Tina protested, “i-isn’t wagering our house’s succession on a duel awfully sudden?”

“L-Lady Stella,” Ellie whined, “I don’t want to fight you.”

“You’ll cede the office of student council president if you lose?” Caren added. “That’s ridiculous! You wouldn’t stand a chance fighting all of us on your own.”

“And that,” I said, stepping behind Lady Stella in a show of support, “is why Lady Stella and I will fight as a team.”

Tina let out an exclamation of surprise, Ellie groaned, Caren shouted my name, and Lynne said, “Dear brother, allow me to join your side.” Lydia, meanwhile, continued to hold her peace.

“I think that we’ll stand a fair chance fighting two against three,” I said. “But not right now. I’d like two weeks to prepare with Lady Stella.”

That announcement brought looks of consternation from Tina, Ellie, and Caren, as well as a plaintive “dear brotherrr” from Lynne, to whom I mentally apologized. The albatross was stealthily preparing a Firebird, and that knowledge made me break out in a cold sweat.

"S-Sir," Tina said, "what about our lessons?"

"You won't have any with me for the next two weeks, but I'm going to give you notes, so train with Caren. I'd say she's a better teacher than I am."

"I object!"

"S-So do I."

"Dear brother, what about me?"

"I'll be testing you on your assignments during our duel," I assured the three girls. "And Lynne, I'll do you any one favor once this is over."

Lynne's eyes widened. "Well, in that case..."

Of course, this announcement prompted cries of "Lynne?!" and "L-Lady Lynne?!" from her classmates.

"Tina. Ellie," I said. "Your big sister has made up her mind, so please, won't you repay her courage in kind?"

The two girls exchanged silent glances and then hesitantly nodded. That only left...

"Caren."

She made me wait for a moment before replying. "You're always like this," she said. "I don't suppose you're going to change your mind?"

"Nope."

Caren heaved a sigh and then shot Lady Stella a piercing look. I could tell how tense she was. "You're confident that you can beat me?" she asked.

The young noblewoman closed her eyes and slowly but emphatically shook her head. She was correct that her odds of victory were extremely low—Caren was strong.

"Then this is a waste of time!" my gentle sister shouted. There was desperation in her voice.

"We won't know that until we fight," Lady Stella replied, bearing up under the strain with a fist pressed to her chest. "As hopeless as I am, Mr. Allen believes in me. Even I have my pride, Caren."

"Stella," Tina interrupted, "I don't *want* to inherit the dukedom. Titles are supposed to pass to the eldest child."

"Tina, the Four Great Dukedoms are the cornerstones of our kingdom. Those of us born into the ducal houses have a duty to defend the land, the royal family, and the people. That responsibility should fall to a worthy heir. That said...I'm not going to lose."

Tina then looked imploringly at me, but I shook my head.

Your sister already told you—her mind is made up.

"B-Big Sis Stella..." Ellie said, on the verge of tears.

"Ellie," Lady Stella replied, "I've been jealous of you too, you know. You used to be a crybaby and a scatterbrain, but you're more talented than I am both magically and physically. Still...I won't back down."

The visibly distressed maid was clinging to Tina's sleeve.

I take it we're all at least technically in agreement?

The door opened to admit Felicia, Mrs. Walker, and several other maids I recognized. Felicia was carrying a sheet of rolled-up paper, while the maids held fabrics.

Lydia set down her cup and stared at me, her eyes narrowed. "I haven't agreed to anything," she said. "Essentially, you're going to devote at least two weeks of your time—weekdays *and* weekends—to Stella. Do I have that right?"

"You do," I admitted.

"And you think I'll allow that? I know you're going to push yourself well beyond—"

"L-L-Lady Lydia. P-P-Please look at this," Felicia abruptly interjected, stiff with nerves, before unrolling her large sheet of paper. Mrs. Walker then unfurled the fabric she was carrying.

Icecloth? That's a northern specialty.

The albatross examined them and then the fabrics in the other maids' hands. Finally, she asked the bespectacled girl, "Will it be ready in time?"

"I'll ensure that it is," Felicia replied. "Mrs. Walker and Ms. Anna have already given their approval. May I have your permission?"

"I see," came Lydia's curt reply. After a brief pause, she said, "If Stella is in agreement, then I don't see why not. But I forbid either of you to overdo it. Make sure that you get proper rest."

In a sudden, unexpected turn, the Lady of the Sword had given her blessing. That aroused my suspicions; she was dangerous when she feigned composure.

Lynne inspected the paper as well and exclaimed, "Felicia, allow me to contribute!” with stars in her eyes. My unease doubled.

“B-But why, Lydia?! Keeping Mr. Allen all to yourself is your guiding principle!” Tina cried, reproaching the albatross for her defection while Ellie stammered in agreement.

“Lydia!” Caren joined in.

“B-Be quiet!” Lydia snapped. “Don’t you believe you can win?”

That retort provoked frustrated groans from the two younger girls and a curt “I’ll win all right” from Caren.

We were all agreed. Lady Stella’s expression was a mix of elation and apprehension, but we would do the best we could. The problem was Lydia, Lynne, and also Felicia, who was standing diffidently a couple of paces behind them. All three were chuckling with an ominous gleam in their eyes, and Mrs. Walker and the Howard maids seemed unusually heated.

A chill ran through me. What were they scheming? I wanted to find out, but I instead surveyed the room and declared: “The duel will be on Lightday two weeks from today. I’ll inform you of the location at a later date.”

Chapter 4

After classes the next day, I was waiting for Lady Stella before the massive main gate of the Royal Academy. I had suggested we meet at the café with the sky-blue roof, but she had replied that she was unfamiliar with the place. I would need to take her sometime. It sounded as though she had devoted even more of her time to study and training at the academy than she had let on the day before.

I checked my pocket watch. She appeared to be running late; the student council president was evidently a busy young lady. In the meantime, several first-years had approached me to say things like, “Will you be teaching here again?” “Please tell me when your next lecture is going to be,” and “My father is much obliged to you, sir. Do you have any interest in business?” It was an honor to be asked, but I had no plans to return to the academy.

All of a sudden, I sensed a presence. Before I could check on it, however, a young woman came running up to me in a great hurry. “Th-Thank you for waiting,” she said. “I’m sorry—I was tied up with student council business.”

“Don’t mention it,” I replied. “I only just got here myself.”

Lady Stella seemed a bit stiff. It wouldn’t hurt her to unwind a little and—

I spotted a lock of hair and a tail poking out from behind a tree, both swaying.

“Sir, Stella...”

“Ooh...”

“Allen, Stella, you jerks...”

Tina, Ellie, and Caren were watching us with conflicted expressions. I felt a pang of conscience, but I resolved to endure it. I believed that they needed this as much as Lady Stella did. Lynne and Felicia, who seemed to have hit it off, had already gone home without noticing me.

“Where will we be training, Mr. Allen?” Lady Stella asked. “I wouldn’t like to use Howard property, especially as I’m already borrowing the villa."

"I called in a favor," I replied. "Let's be on our way. But first..."

"But first?"

As if on cue, Her Highness's stomach grumbled adorably, and her face reddened. She then began weakly pummeling my arm in embarrassment. The nearby students stopped to stare. Boys and girls alike were entranced by this uncommon side of their student council president, and intense sulkiness radiated from behind the tree.

"Let's pick up something sweet on the way," I said.

"You're so quick to make fun of me."

"You and Tina, yes."

Lady Stella fumed, and in the distance, I thought I could hear someone shout, "Why single out my sister and me?!"

"Now, let's get going," I said. "Our host is waiting."

The Algren villa stood close to the palace but not exactly in the most luxurious district of the city. Its dingy walls and windows spoke to disuse. Before the front gate, which bore the Algren arms, my former underclassman was waiting for us alongside an unfamiliar young woman in men's clothing. Her jet-black hair—a rarity in the royal capital—was gathered in a simple bunch behind her head, and her skin was a little on the dark side. Perhaps she hailed from the city of water to the south? She was tall and slender and wore a plain dagger for self-defense at her waist.

"Allen."

"Gil. Thank you for waiting. Allow me to introduce you. This is Her Highness, Lady Stella Howard. Are you acquainted?"

Both Gil and Lady Stella nodded. It was only natural that the children of ducal houses would at least know each other by sight.

"Okay. Our turn," Gil said.

"My name is Konoha," the black-haired young woman responded. "I was recently appointed to serve as Lord Gil's bodyguard and maid."

"I'm Allen. I owe Gil for— Hang on. *Do* I owe you for anything?"

"Oh, come on, Allen," Gil whined.

I chuckled. "Gil was a great help to me at the university. Please take good care of him."

"Of course!" Konoha declared. "Even if it costs me my life!"

Gil was busy fiddling with the lock and key; my compliment must have embarrassed him. This side of him was part of what made him so beloved in the department, but I wouldn't tell him that.

"Th-There; the gate's open," he said. "Come on in. Um..."

"I'll prepare tea," Konoha announced, vanishing into the house.

"So, you've got a maid bodyguard now?" I asked my former underclassman, who was scratching his head in embarrassment.

"I tried to turn her down, okay? Come in."

We followed Gil into the sprawling grounds. In fact, they were *too* sprawling for my liking. But while I quailed inwardly, Her Highness was unfazed. Financial sensibilities were one area in which I would never be able to keep up with the nobility.

I'd expected the grounds to have been abandoned to nature, but they appeared well cared for. The plants had even been pruned.

"Gil..." I said.

"I haven't done anything," he replied. "I didn't seriously amp up the barriers, and I definitely didn't order the baths and things to be fixed up in a hurry after you asked me yesterday."

He was impossible—not that I wasn't glad, but what was the point of spending so much money on a villa that we were only going to use for two weeks?

"I see that your former underclassmen at the university are quite fond of you as well," Lady Stella remarked, casually summing up the situation.

Is that really the issue here?

Gil led us to a roofed patio furnished with a wooden table and several chairs of the same material. Ahead of us was a large, dirt-floored space, slightly lower than the patio, that would pass for an impromptu training ground. Gil was obviously avoiding my gaze. I was grateful, but there was such a thing as too much.

Lady Stella descended into the spacious makeshift arena and began limbering up. She was raring to go.

"Thank you for letting us use this place," I said. "Are you sure it won't be an issue?"

"Don't sweat it," Gil replied. "No one was using it anyway."

"As for the cost of renovations—"

"Forget about it."

"Gil."

"I wish you'd come hang out at the university when we're around. Everyone misses you."

That was my schoolmate Gil Algren all over. There wasn't a malicious bone in his body; he wore his heart on his sleeve; and once he opened up to someone, he had the unwavering loyalty of a large dog.

"Very well," I said. "I'll spend some time with you. Would you like me to bring Lydia along?"

"I-I can do without the boss!" Gil exclaimed. Then, under his breath, he added, "Anyone could predict the fiery hell that'd lead to."

"Did you say something?"

"No, not a thing. Your student is waiting for you."

"All right. Gil, may I borrow a branch from you?"

"I don't mind," he replied with a puzzled look.

With a silent apology, I knocked a branch off a nearby tree and then used wind magic to fashion it into a wooden sword and wand. Once that was done, I descended into the training ground and squared off with the young noblewoman who was finishing her warm-up exercises. I very much liked the look on her face.

"Lady Stella," I called to her while drawing a small circle on the ground with my wooden sword.

"Y-Yes?!"

"Please show me what you're capable of."

"What do you mean?"

"I won't move from this circle. If you can force me out of it, victory is yours."

"I won't hold back, you know," Lady Stella hesitantly replied.

"I know you won't, and I'll counterattack as needed. Like this, for example."

I waved my wand and activated a water spell from diagonally above and behind Lady Stella. It struck her on the back of the neck before she could even react, leaving her dumbfounded as she felt the impact site.

"That was merely an elementary spell," I said. "I'm going to use every element that Tina, Ellie, and Caren can."

I waved my wand again, completing my deployment of spell formulae throughout the arena, all ready for immediate activation. And the young noblewoman who had just drawn her rapier and wand couldn't see them. I was aware that she might struggle on our first day; no one found it easy to change their ingrained ideas.

"Now, shall we begin?" I asked. "Show me the best you can do!"

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"I've just returned," I reported with a bow to Lord Gil.

"Welcome back, Ms. Konoha," he replied.

"Just 'Konoha,' please," I said, laying out the tea treats on the table.

The training was already underway. Her Highness, Lady Stella Howard, retreated and then conjured countless icy projectiles with a wave of her wand. The barrage bore down on the young man, but he intercepted them with a stone wall. Still, his opponent was a direct descendant of a ducal house; she took full advantage of her mana to freeze the wall and then breach it. An instant later, all of her projectiles vanished. Cause unknown.

Her Highness bit her lip and then advanced, summoning a fresh storm of ice shots as she went. She appeared intent on challenging the young man at close quarters, using her spells to distract him from her charge. Once he was in range of her rapier, she thrust it straight at him...but it did her no good. The young man blocked her obviously fine blade with his apparently wooden weapon. He had not moved a single step.

Suddenly, Her Highness stopped moving. Why had—

The ground under her feet had turned to mud and then frozen. Elementary spells assailed her not only from the front but from all sides, although the barrage appeared to be nonlethal.

"So, that's the partner of the famed Lady of the Sword—the *Brain* of the Lady of the Sword," I said. "His mastery of spell control is intimidating, although rumor made him out to be a shameless fellow who accompanies Her Highness despite lacking the mana to cast advanced spells."

In an instant, Lord Gil's demeanor did an about-face. His frivolity vanished without a trace, leaving only a glacial chill that made me recoil. "Are you dense?" he said. "If you're gonna fall for that nonsense, pack up and head back east."

It took me a moment to compose myself and ask, "What do you mean, my lord?"

"Allen, shameless? What have the main house's intelligencers been doing with their time?" His tone was pitying.

"B-But my lord," I argued in confusion, "as far as I can judge based on information in public circulation—"

"That makes twice."

"My lord?"

"Are you actually brainless? Can't you tell that's a blind?"

"It's a what?" Did he mean that information about the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, not the Lady of the Sword herself, was being falsified?

Lord Gil ignored my questions and turned his attention to the training ground, where Her Highness appeared to be under pressure. She crossed her rapier and wand, and numerous shining pale spears of ice materialized. It was the renowned advanced ice spell Swift Ice Lances. Her skill was impressive; I would never have guessed she was a student.

The young man, by contrast, appeared lost in thought. That didn't stop the lances from accelerating to tremendous speeds, aiming to impale him...but every single one vanished into thin air before reaching his circle.

He dispelled advanced magic?! But how...?

"The Lady of the Sword is strong," Lord Gil resumed. "The commander of the royal guard and the former Lady of the Sword, Duchess Lisa Leinster, are probably the only people in the kingdom who could go toe to toe with her. If the boss were on her own, anyway."

"You mean to say things would be different if she had her 'Brain' with her?" I asked.

"The boss is unbeatable with Allen at her side; not even the empire's Hero could take her down. If the two of them got serious, they could majorly shake up the balance of power in the kingdom—actually, make that the kingdom *and* its neighbors."

"Y-You must be joking. You almost make them sound like the ancient..." I fell silent, leaving the word "heroes" unspoken. Lord Gil gave me a scornful look, as though I were late in realizing a basic fact.

"The Lady of the Sword started racking up honors four years ago," he said. "Why do you think that is?"

"Perhaps she was too young before then," I ventured.

Lord Gil stifled a derisive laugh, which was completely unlike the laugh he had directed at the young man. "Do you think you could've beaten the boss when she was thirteen, then? They say she had Lord Rodde, the Archmage, on the ropes and nearly in tears during her Royal Academy entrance exam—and that was before she could really use magic."

I said nothing. I couldn't possibly claim that I would win that fight. How could I? The Archmage was a living legend with more than two centuries of experience. Even history books singled him out, reporting that he had won glory in battle after battle throughout the War of the Dark Lord and even engaged its namesake in combat. He was superhuman—some even said "immortal."

"By the time the boss started university, she was more than even the professor could handle," Lord Gil continued. "Allen was watching the fight, so there was no way she could lose. When she does, it'll be the end of the world."

I was stunned. By "the professor," was he referring to the former head of the court sorcerers? The man known as "the only sorcerer who can rival the Archmage"? I could practically hear the blood draining from my face. I had come all this way to help Lord Gil.

"Everyone's got it wrong. The Leinsters were the first ones to notice Allen, and do you realize how much he's done for them?" Lord Gil asked. "The boss inherited her nickname, and their house prospered. It'll be the same with the Howards. And at the center of it all is—"

"Stop that," the young man interrupted, seizing Lord Gil by his cheeks. My blood ran cold. I hadn't even detected his approach. Had his intention been to assassinate my lord, I couldn't even have served as a human shield.

"A-Awwen!" Lord Gil protested. "Ow! That hurtsh!"

"Is that any way to talk to a girl you've barely met?!" the young man said and then turned to me. "Please pay him no mind."

I nodded to him as courtesy demanded, but I also silently gritted my teeth in frustration.

"You're too soft on girls," Lord Gil complained. "Where's the president?"

"Taking a break."

Her Highness was on one knee and gasping for air, her rapier stabbed into the dirt. Spells and sword strokes had made a mess of the ground around her, but the earth inside the circle that had surrounded the young man was...unscathed?

"Whoa..." Lord Gil said. "You didn't cut her any slack."

"Would you care to join in?"

"As if!"

The young man gazed down at his feet, looking quite dejected. It was an act, but it shook Lord Gil nonetheless.

Stop it, Lord Gil. Don't make that face where I can see you.

"Don't you like me, Gil?" the young man asked. "I can't believe my old schoolmates despise me. It breaks my heart..."

"C-Come on, Allen. You know you go easy on girls but never on us. It's not fair!"

"Gil, no one who has better luck in love than his upperclassman deserves a handicap. Wasn't that the first thing you learned at school?"

"Y-You're inhuman!" Lord Gil cried and then added in a lower voice, "Besides, you just had the boss running a perfect defense. Just look at how you ended up the moment you got out of her clutches. Maybe you've got *too* much of a natural 'way with young ladies.'"

"Hm? Did you say something about me?"

"Nope. Give me a break. Now, haven't you got more training to do?"

"Oh, you're right. Lady Stella, break time is over!"

Her Highness groaned with pain and indignation but still rose to her feet, her eyes brimming with the will to fight. The training session resumed.

The girl must have put ceaseless effort into both her spellcasting and swordplay, but...it did her no good. Her spells vanished before striking their target, while all of her sword strokes were blocked and parried. The young man's elementary spells appeared unpredictably from all directions, and every one of his shots hit home.

How does he do it? If this were a real fight, it would have been over a long time ago.

I thought back on my instructions: "The commoner, Allen, is of no importance. Ignore him. The movements of the Leinsters and Howards are your highest priority. We must learn how they will respond to our Great Cause." But these assumptions were incorrect. If we made an enemy of this young man, the plan was sure to fail. He demanded the utmost caution.

"I don't know what the main house is scheming, but I'm not gonna become a duke," my lord grumbled beside me. "Dad just worries too much. There's no way my brothers are gonna try anything. And I wanna stay on equal terms with Allen."

No. You're wrong, my lord. They're going to use you! The Ducal House of Algren means nothing to me, but you...

Lord Gil had saved me as a child, and I wanted to protect him. But I couldn't tell him the truth—my lips were sealed by magic.

"That's the way," the young man said, complimenting Her Highness as she began to counter spells that came from directions other than in front of her. "You never know what angle Tina's, Ellie's, and Caren's spells will come from."

"R-Right!"

Whatever happened, I needed to keep Lord Gil safe. And at present, that meant wasting no time in investigating this young man. It was for my dear lord's survival.

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It was a weekend morning, and Lady Stella and I were sitting in a familiar café with a sky-blue roof. Outside, it unfortunately looked like rain, although I did enjoy watching the colorful umbrellas through the windows. I took a sip of coffee as I flipped through my notebook. It was delicious.

The young lady seated across from me was dressed lightly in shorts, a shirt, and a beret, all of which became her wonderfully. "U-Um, Mr. Allen?" she said.

"Yes? If you'd like my tart, help yourself to half." I bisected my pastry and moved one piece to her already empty plate.

"Really? Thank you so— No, that's not it." Lady Stella's eyes sparkled, but then she pressed her hands to her forehead. Didn't she want this delectable seasonal fruit tart? "We have too little time to be wasting it like this!" she pleaded earnestly.

"Breaks are necessary," I replied. "We've been training after your school day ends for six days straight. Besides which, I'm far more concerned that you're in your third year at the Royal Academy and you've never even set foot in a café on your own."

"W-Well... I was e-embarrassed." She fidgeted and then picked up her cup. Her every movement radiated grace. I could understand why Caren had told me that "Stella is secretly very, very popular with boys. She's out of everyone's league."

I turned to a blank page of my notebook. “I won’t beat around the bush—as things stand, you’re going to lose next week. I trust you realize that?”

She seemed troubled as she said, “I do.”

“You’ll barely have enough time to make minor improvements to your spell formulae, let alone replace them. I suggest you fight using existing formulae.”

“B-But...don’t Tina, Ellie, and Caren use *your* spell formulae?”

“Yes, they do.”

“Th-Then how can I compete with them unless I do the same?”

Tina, Ellie, and Caren all used the new spell formulae with increased “blank space” that I had devised in lieu of established equivalents. That went for Lydia and Lynne as well. There were a lot of advantages to this, but someone who had practiced existing formulae for as long as Lady Stella had would find it difficult to make the switch so quickly. The other girls had only managed to do so because they had learned my formulae before completing their basic magical education.

“You’ve mastered advanced magic,” I said with a shake of my head. “Trying to change formulae by force would pose a greater risk. We can at least revise the portions that limit you to forward deployment and activation, but I suggest we find other ways to bridge the gap.”

“Such as?”

“Here.” My pen raced across the page as I jotted down the chief characteristics of our three opponents.

Tina: A typical rear-line fighter. Somewhat lacking at close quarters.

Ellie: A mid-range fighter who also excels in close combat. An extremely silent caster.

Caren: Essentially a front-line fighter, but capable of battle at all ranges.

Lady Stella was intently observing me write but seemed to have difficulty reading my notes from where she was seated. I shifted to one side and patted the couch beside me a few times. Lady Stella shot me a questioning glance.

“Sit next to me,” I said.

“Oh... O-Of course.” The lovely young lady blushed and took the seat beside me, leaving a handspan or two of space between us. I caught a faint, noticeably floral aroma. Could it be her perfume?

I resumed my explanation. “As you can see, there are no gaps in their formation. Tina and Ellie are in sync, while Caren primarily takes the vanguard but can fight at long range as well.”

Lady Stella paused before replying “I know.”

“You, Lady Stella, are an all-rounder—you can perform any role flawlessly. You also excel at activating multiple spells simultaneously.”

“I may do it flawlessly, but I can’t do anything special,” she demurred as she cut into her tart with a fork.

Lady Stella compared favorably to others in her age group. Her swordplay hewed closely to the fundamentals, and her spellcasting was as steady as her personality. She had even learned three advanced spells. She was more than qualified to lead the student council, but she was suffering from a loss of confidence. I only hoped that she would come to that realization on her own.

“That means you have the edge in some areas,” I said.

“What?”

“First of all, you can defeat Tina.”

“My sister can cast a supreme spell,” Lady Stella hesitantly replied.

“That doesn’t matter. You’re her better in melee combat, so you need only close distance with her. You should also be able to break through her barrages of spells as long as you focus on defense.” I added my observations to the notebook between the names of the two noblewomen, prompting the platinum-haired young lady to blink in surprise.

“You can defeat Ellie too,” I continued, making another addition to my notebook. “She’s not well prepared for long-range combat at present, although that may change. So, simply keep your distance and force her to engage you entirely with spells.”

Realization dawned in Lady Stella’s eyes. She wouldn’t have needed me to tell her this if she had been her usual self, but excessive mental pressure would keep anyone from performing at their best.

“The problem is Caren.” I added another name to the notebook—my own—which made Lady Stella gasp. “Remember—this duel is going to be two against three, not one against three.”

“B-But...unless I do it myself...”

“Excuse me.” I got the attention of a familiar waitress. “Another coffee, please.”

“Coming right up!” The waitress showed intense interest as she took my order, but I exercised my right to remain silent. The interruption had left Lady Stella faltering.

“I just ordered a coffee from the waitress, didn’t I?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yes. You did,” Lady Stella replied.

“There’s your answer.”

“I don’t quite—”

“You don’t have to think about doing everything yourself. I depend on help from a lot of other people. Take Lydia, for instance—I make her deal with most of the really intense fighting.”

This young lady was trying to shoulder too much alone. There was only so much that one person could do, and nobody could keep hold of everything. I hoped to remind Tina, Ellie, and Caren of that as well.

“May I ask for your help?” Lady Stella timidly inquired.

“By all means,” I replied. “But you mustn’t rely on me for everything. I would weep if you took after a certain other duke’s daughter who selfishly foists everything but combat onto me.”

Lady Stella giggled. “I might enjoy making you cry.”

I merely raised my hands in surrender. We both burst out laughing and then exchanged relaxed smiles.

“I’ll do the best I can,” Lady Stella said softly. “When this is over...may I ask a favor of you?”

“A favor?” I repeated.

“Yes. I’m sure that I could work much, much harder if you would. Please?” There was something wheedling about the way the beautiful young lady gazed up at me.

You’re right, Caren. I’m certain that your president is very *popular.*

“Very well,” I said. “I’ll give you all of the professor’s secret memos on *The Finest Desserts of the Royal Capital.*”

She fumed and gave me a playful smack. Her every gesture was adorable.

“If you win, I’ll do any favor you like,” I responded with a smile. “But please don’t make it too extravagant.”

I was about to exit the café when Lady Stella let out a cry. “My umbrella is missing!” she said.

For a while, I helped her in searching for it, but it really was gone. Someone must have taken it by mistake.

Behind the counter, the proprietor was saying something to the waitress, but all I could make out was “Our... Got it.” I wondered what they were talking about.

It was still raining outside, so I offered my own umbrella to Lady Stella. “Please feel free,” I said.

“Wh-What?” she asked, looking shocked. “I couldn’t possibly. The villa isn’t far.”

“I insist. What if you caught a cold? I’ll run home.”

“No! I-I don’t know what I’d do if you fell ill!”

“You’re quite a stubborn student council president.”

“And you’re quite a stubborn private tutor.”

We were at an impasse. Neither one of us was willing to back down.

The waitress approached us with a smile. “Why don’t you share an umbrella?” she cheerfully suggested. “We don’t have any to spare.”

Lady Stella looked slightly confused, then darted a glance at my umbrella. Finally, her eyes widened. The waitress was all smiles.

Well, I can’t let her get soaked, I thought as I opened my umbrella and beckoned the young lady to join me.

“E-Excushe me,” Lady Stella said, tripping over her words like Ellie. Despite her embarrassment, she joined me under the umbrella. Our shoulders collided, and she hurriedly withdrew but then timidly approached again until our shoulders touched. She was blushing so hard that even her ears were red, and her face was resolutely pointed downward.

“Lady Stella,” I said, beginning to walk.

“Yes?” she slowly replied.

“Let’s win. What do you say?”

“Y-Yes, let’s!”

The information that we had shared an umbrella spread through the Royal Academy like wildfire thanks to a student who had apparently been present in the café. The albatross had then caught wind of it and forced her way into my lodgings...but that's another story.

Actually, her timing had been perfect, since there was a matter I'd been meaning to discuss with her in person. Still, I wondered what she had been measuring me for.

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"I think that's enough for now," I told the winded young lady. We were in the grounds of the Algren villa. The dirt floor of our training area was frozen in places, and the moon and stars shone in the sky. It was time to call it a day.

Gil had pressed the key of the villa on me, saying, "I'll leave cooking, cleaning, and repairs to you. Help yourself to the baths too. And Allen...just try not to level the city." The nerve of him. Not that I didn't appreciate it.

"Not yet. I can still...keep going," Lady Stella gasped, sounding as though she wasn't satisfied yet.

"No, we'll call it here," I replied. "The duel is tomorrow, so go home early and get a good night's sleep."

"B-But—"

"Don't worry. You made it in time." I pointed to the circle with my wooden sword. There were shards of ice inside it.

She stared at it dubiously, then turned to look at me in silent surprise.

"Lady Stella?" I asked.

"Don't call me 'Lady.'" She paused and then added, "It's taken two weeks."

I shot her a quizzical look.

"I finally, finally landed a hit in your circle, Mr. Allen. Even though you're mean, and strict, and you're trying to get me addicted to sweets."

"That strikes me as a mix of fact and fiction," I remarked. "And in that case, please don't call me 'Mr.'"

"I-It is not, and I couldn't! But you...you set me on the right path when I had lost my way. You truly are the kindest magician I could ask for." Her voice trailed off into inaudibility as she spoke. Where had all her excitement gone?

"Stella?"

"Let's finish up here. I-If you'd care to join me in the baths..."

"I won't take one; I'm going to put this arena back as it was. Now, my lady who's easily embarrassed and a poor liar..."

"Mr. Allen!"

"I hope we'll both do all we can tomorrow. The matter we discussed depends on the situation."

"O-Of course!"

"Please go rinse off. Then, let's go to a wonderful eatery in the western district for dinner."

I returned to my lodgings after escorting Stella to her villa and found the door unlocked.

So, she's here.

I entered to discover a wolf-clan girl on my sofa, hugging a cushion and wearing one of my shirts in lieu of a nightgown.

"I'm home, Caren."

"Welcome back," she replied after a brief silence. "You're early. Have you figured out a plan to beat us?"

"Hm... Good question. Have you eaten?"

"I have."

No sooner had I begun to remove my coat than she quickly approached me and took it from my hands. Despite her glum demeanor, she draped it over a hanger and stowed it in the closet with practiced movements.

"I've whipped Tina and Ellie into shape," she said sullenly. "You're paired with Stella and outnumbered. I doubt even you stand a chance. Those girls are as brilliant as you said they were. I only have to introduce a concept to them for them to figure out the rest on their own. They're much faster learners than Stella is."

"Caren, is that any way to speak?"

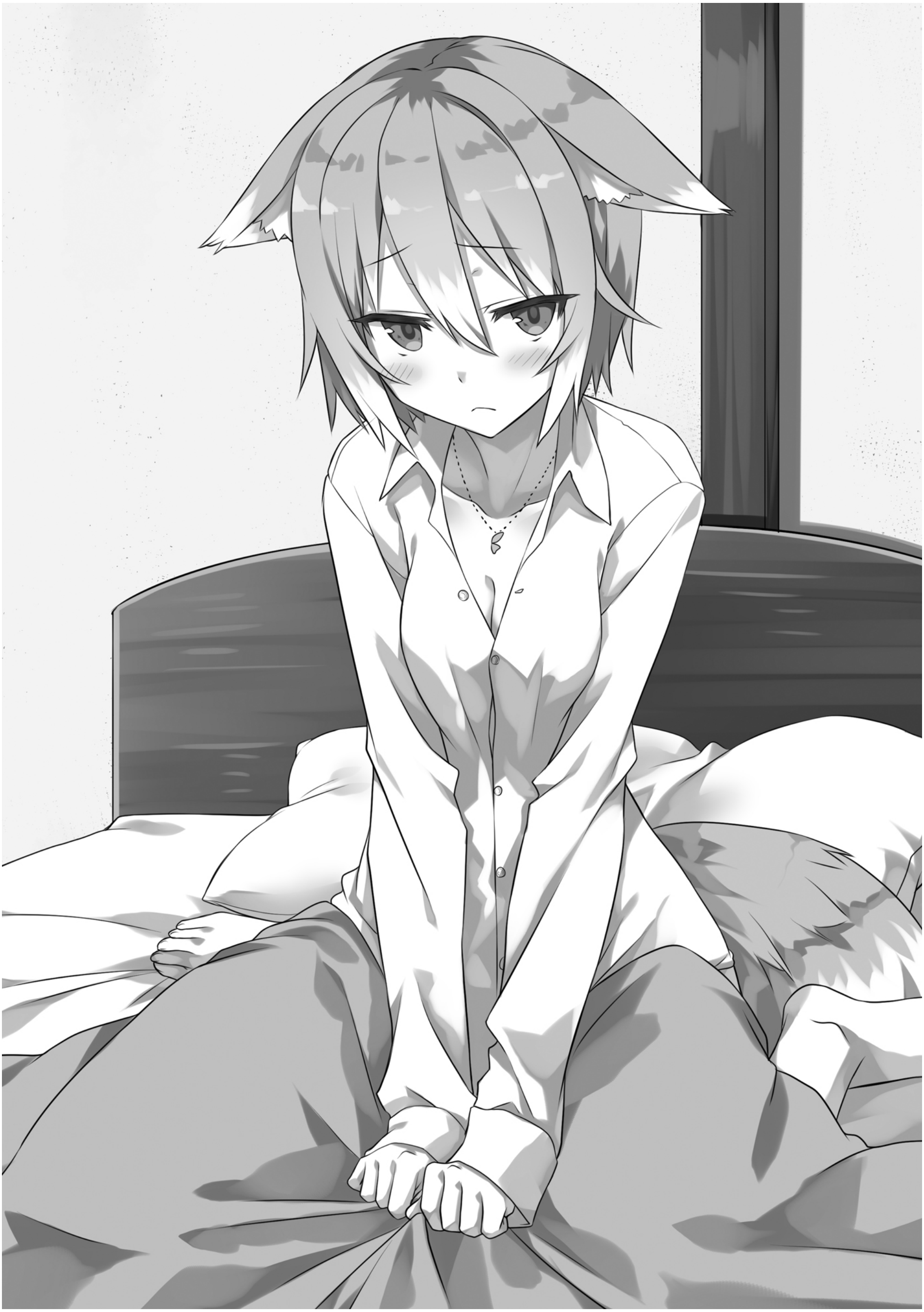
She paused for a moment before curtly replying. "I don't care. I'm going to bed, and we're going to win tomorrow." Then, she headed for the guest room. She must have been angrier than I'd realized, and that probably went for Tina and Ellie as well. I would need to make it up to them once this was over.

I need to find some way to better our odds, I thought as I turned off the lights and made for my own bedroom. I'd received a reply to the letter I'd sent north by griffin a few days prior, so I checked its contents and then tucked it away in a small box. Duke Walter was every bit as exasperatingly awkward as Stella.

I set about writing down a spell formula in the notebook that lay open on my desk. I probably lacked the mana to so much as deploy it, but—

The door quietly opened. I continued to write while I sensed someone move to the bed and heard her slip under the blankets. "Caren, haven't I told you that you're not allowed to sleep in here?" I reminded her as my pen sped over the page.

"I don't care" was her belated reply. "I'm exercising my natural right as your little sister." That was unambiguous, meaning that trying to change her mind would be a wasted effort. The albatross said much the same thing.



Spending all my time with Stella on weekends and after she finished class on weekdays had made me realize something. Existing ice magic forcibly converted the elements of water and wind in order to manifest ice, but Stella's spells contained light as well, and not in a fixed proportion. It didn't stem from her spell formulae, so I could only guess at the reason. It was a trick of the elementals if ever I'd seen one.

The only certainty was that the more light her spells contained, the greater their power and the less mana they consumed. Existing spell formulae were consistent in their performance, barring extreme differences in mana. That was why magic had become so widespread and also why it was in decline. But there was something different about Stella's ice spells.

I sensed that Caren had moved to the edge of the bed, within arm's reach of me. She was apparently eager for attention. I closed my notebook, set down my pen, and turned to face my sister, who was looking uneasily up at me.

"Allen," she said hesitantly.

"Hm?"

"Do you think Stella...hates me now?"

"She loves you. Felicia, Tina, and Ellie too."

"Then...why offer to give me her presidency if she loses? Tina and Ellie are acting nervous too. They're worried about what will happen if we win. I'll do my best, and the girls have been over your notes so many times they're practically in tatters, but...I can't root for Stella like Felicia does." Caren's ears lay flat, and there were tears in her eyes. I reached out a hand to her, and she grabbed hold of it.

"Listen, Caren," I said. "Stella was nervous."

"Nervous about what?"

"As a scion of a ducal house, she bears a heavy burden of responsibility. Seeing the girls' and your growth, Felicia's decision, and Lydia and me made her lose faith in herself."

Caren seemed to take a moment to mull that over. "I am who I am," she said. "Mom and dad believe in me, and so do you, so I believe in myself."

"I'm sure you do, but Lady Stella doesn't have anyone like that. She used to, but not anymore." My sister must have known about

Duchess Rosa.

I was certain that Stella had been precocious and levelheaded. That had earned her the trust of the people in her life, but it had also left her unable to ask anyone to walk with her in the dark. She hadn't been able to bring herself to say the words.

"Once this is all over, I want you to listen to all her worries," I continued. "Do that, and I'm certain things will be just fine."

"All right," Caren slowly replied. Her ears had returned to normal.

Now, back to work.

"Allen."

"Hm?"

"Take good care of my best friend."

"I will."

"And..."

"Hm?"

"I want to sleep in your room tonight."

"You're so spoiled."

"But...I've been so lonely." Her confession threatened to trail off into silence. She hadn't had a long conversation with me in two weeks. Lady Stella was living at the Howard villa and Felicia was busy conspiring with the Leinsters and Howards, so she probably hadn't gotten many opportunities to speak with them either.

I reached out and tousled her hair. "All right, but you'd better not hold anything back tomorrow."

"I already told you, even with your help, Stella can't..."

"You might lose if you don't take her seriously."

"But—"

"Go to sleep. I'll keep holding your hand until you nod off."

Caren fell silent for a moment and then said, "You go to bed too."

"I still have things to check up on."

"No. Get some sleep. I won't go to bed until you do."

I took another look at my notebook. I had successfully formulated the theory, although I hoped we wouldn't need to use it. Caren squeezed my hand.

"Sorry," I said. "I'll go to bed."

"I want to sleep here...with you."

The adorable sound of Caren's rhythmic breathing told me that she had already fallen asleep. I could feel my heart warming and resolved to hold nothing back the next day. Then, I turned off the light and lay down on an edge of the bed. I had no dreams that night.

*

It was the Lightday of the duel, and there was not a cloud in the sky. The combatants and spectators were all assembled at the Algren villa, which was now spotless—the Leinster and Howard maids had evidently given its interior a thorough cleaning.

I had already met with Stella, who was dressed in her school uniform. She had pointed to the silver wing-and-sword insignia on her beret—her badge of office as president of the student council—and cheerfully declared, “I won’t give this up! I’m going to win!” And with that, she had proceeded outside ahead of me to begin warming up.

As for myself, I was lost in melancholy thoughts. *I did have an inkling...but still.* I stared reproachfully at the albatross, who was wearing a brand-new scarlet dress.

“What?” she asked.

“You’ve gone too far,” I replied heavily.

“*Excuse* me?!”

“Surely if anyone should be losing their temper, it’s me.”

My reflection in the full-length mirror wore an unfamiliar set of sorcerer’s robes—pristine and snow white, dotted with intersecting bands of scarlet and azure fabric and adorned with gold and platinum thread, among other embellishments. They were obviously beyond luxurious, and the mere thought of their price made my stomach turn.

The robes were Felicia’s handiwork. Upon seeing me in them, she had let out a cheer of “Victory! I’ve won! The day is mine! Time to sleep!” and then collapsed onto a sofa. She was currently sound asleep in the arms of Emma, who was regarding her with the look of a caring mother. What in the world had happened between them over the past two weeks?

Lydia drew closer and began to scrutinize me at extremely close quarters with a noncommittal “Hm...”

“Wh-What now?” I asked.

“I suppose it’ll do. Anna!”

“At once, Lady Lydia!” The Leinsters’ head maid appeared in the room without warning. Hadn't I just seen her outside, sweeping as she said, "Th-The House of Howard has bested me in cleaning... N-No! The Leinster Maid Corps knows no defeat! This is but a tactical retreat!" She was carrying a long object swathed in white cloth, which she offered to me with a cheerful "For you, Mr. Allen."

I accepted the bundle with confusion. After seeing what lay under the cloth, however, I shot the albatross a look.

"Lydia."

"You wouldn't want to be seen using a handmade wooden sword and wand, would you?" she replied. "I'll lend you this."

"I couldn't possibly use it."

"Just take it!" she snapped. Then, in a calmer tone, she added, "No one is more qualified to wield it than you are."

I gazed silently at what I had been given—the staff granted to Lydia by the royal family upon her appointment to the court sorcerers. It was engraved with a number of enchanted sigils, although it appeared to be simple wood at first glance.

"Thank you," I said at length, lowering my eyelids ever so slightly. "I'll borrow it just for today."

"Keep it forever for all I care," the albatross replied. "It's mine, anyway. Oh, that reminds me. Anna."

"Of course, my lady!" Anna chimed in.

This time, the head maid courteously held out a small box. Lydia took it and withdrew a scarlet ribbon, which she tied around the staff. She then picked up the wooden sword and wand that I had set down. "That's better," the albatross remarked. "If anything happens to it, I'll incinerate you. And I'll hold on to these as collateral."

"Lydia," I said, "you *do* remember that I'll be going up against Caren, don't you?"

"Do you expect me to believe you've gotten so rusty that you'd let my ribbon get damaged?"

Don't make this any more difficult than it already is.

Anna was in the process of recording us, laughing all the while. "Operation: Dress Lady Lydia and Mr. Allen to the Nines was conceived for the royal sorcerer appointment ceremony," she remarked. "I never dreamed that its true form would see the light of day. I can't thank Miss Fosse enough!"

I looked at Lydia in silence.

"Th-This is the first I've heard of it," she responded and turned her face away. “How’s Stella?”

“We’ve only had two weeks,” I reported, smiling at her reaction. “That wasn’t even enough time for her to make the switch to new formulae.”

“Hm... Listen, if you cheat on me—”

“What do you mean by that? And Lydia...”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

That seemed to catch her off guard. “Excuse me?” she finally said.

“Thank you,” I repeated and then rested my head on the albatross’s shoulder so that she couldn’t see my face. “And again, I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to join the court sorcerers with you.”

I was so certain I’d put that behind me, I thought, disgusted by my own weakness.

“Dummy...” she replied and gently embraced me. “I’m together with you, and you’re together with me. Where’s the problem?”

I sighed. “Nowhere. I suppose you’re right.”

The door slowly opened, and there came a deliberate “*Ahem*.” Fleeting snowflakes were vanishing in the face of plumes of flame. I heard frustrated stamping, but it was weaker than usual.

“What do you think you’re doing? Let go of him.” Tina was glaring at us. She was dressed in her school uniform and seemed nervous. Ellie stood behind her, wearing her maid uniform and looking dejected.

“I don’t take orders from you,” Lydia replied. “Now hurry along to the training ground. Shoo.”

At that point, Lynne staggered into the room. No sooner had she caught sight of me than her eyes widened and she raised a fist in the air with a cry of “Success! I was—*we* were—justified.” Her retinue of maids appeared to share her elation.

We had only been apart for two weeks, but it felt good to see them all again. I signaled to Lydia with a glance, and she reluctantly moved away from me.

“Tina. Ellie. Lynne,” I said. “How have you been?”

“What do you want, sir?” Tina replied. “You’re our enemy—well, no, I know you’ll always be on our side, but you’re our...opponent. That’s right. You’re our opponent, and I refuse to fraternize with you. Kindly bow down before the tactics we’ve devised to vanquish you.”

"Lady Tina... Mr. Allen..." Ellie said.

"Dear brother," Lynne interjected. "Felicia, the Leinster and Howard maids, and I have accomplished our task, and *I'm* not one of your opponents. Therefore..." She flung herself at me with a cheerful shout. The disheveled state of her red hair told me how hard she had been working.

Easy now, Lydia. Lynne is your sister, remember?

"Thank you for the clothes," I said, catching the young noblewoman. "They're magnificent, although I don't know whether they suit me."

"They suit you to a T! You look marvelous. Now, dear brother, place your hand right here." Lynne seized my hand and began moving it toward her head.

"Now I've had it..." Tina said, letting her outstretched hand fall to her side and then clenching it.

"Oh, Mr. Allen..." Ellie added, following suit.

"Quiet. You're making a racket," Caren snapped as she entered the room. She wore her school uniform with the silver wing and staff on her beret that marked her as the student council vice president. Her eyes widened when she saw me and then took in Lynne. "Allen, Lynne, this is hardly the occasion," she chided. "It's time."

"All right," I replied. "Lynne."

"Of course, dear brother," the red-haired young noblewoman chirped and obediently stepped away from me.

"Move to the arena," Caren instructed Tina and Ellie. "We have important matters to attend to."

"All right," both girls replied reluctantly, sounding unhappy but determined. I realized that they must have been finding this difficult, but I was confident that Stella would be able to get through to them now.

I nodded to Caren. *Don't worry. It's going to be all right.*

"If you let your guards down, we'll lose," Caren warned the girls, aiming to rouse their spirits. "I take it you're prepared?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" Tina and Ellie replied in unison.

"We're going to win."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Let's move!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Caren, Tina, and Ellie left the room ahead of us. I was just thinking that I ought to follow them when hands seized both my arms.

"You're coming with us," the albatross informed me.

"Dear brother, why did you arrive in Caren's company this morning?"

I decided that our discussion could wait until after the duel.

*

Gil greeted us at the rest area in front of the training ground. His maid attendant with a predilection for menswear was nowhere to be seen. Stella, Tina, Ellie, and Caren were already in the arena.

"Good mor— Allen."

"Not another word," I replied. "Don't tell anyone, and don't record me. I'm well aware that I look ridiculous."

"You look great, man!" Gil exclaimed. "Whoever made that outfit is a god!"

I staggered. D-Did he realize what he was saying?! I was the one who would have to pay the price!

Felicia was still clinging to Emma, but that didn't stop her from ducking out of Gil's sight and mouthing, "Any requests?" to me.

No, thank you.

Contrary to my heartfelt wishes, Anna and Mrs. Walker, those two great leaders, were engaged in a worrying conversation. I overheard Anna say, "May our house take the lead in the next outfit?" only to be met with a disapproving, "I cannot agree to that. I suggest you dedicate yourself to the fundamentals of cleaning," that left her reeling. I prayed that their plans would come to nothing.

"Where is your maid attendant?" I asked Gil.

"I'm expecting some serious spells, so I figured it was best not to bring her," he replied. The Ducal House of Algren was a military family, but I doubted they would steal any secrets.

"You needn't worry."

"Well, I do. Oh, I don't think I've met the girl with the glasses before. I'm Gil Algren."

Felicia looked startled and stammered, "I-I-I'm—"

"Gil," Lydia interjected, "where is *my* greeting?"

"B-Boss! H-How do you—"

"Poorly, thanks to a certain former underclassman who's forgotten his manners."

"I don't believe that for a minute. You've got Allen looking all dressed up and you're in a dress yourself. I bet you're planning to watch the recordings after—"

A dagger of flame shot through the air, reducing several hairs of Gil's bangs to ash before striking and stabbing straight through a nearby pillar. Lydia took a seat, crossed her legs, and rested one elbow on the table, looking every inch the villain. Lynne imitated her pose in the seat beside her.

"You were saying?" Lydia asked.

"N-N-Not a thing." Gil was standing at attention and shaking like a leaf, which had been a familiar sight during our days at the university. I withdrew a scrap of notepaper from my pocket and handed it to him.

"Allen?" he asked, eyeing it quizzically.

"A thank-you from me," I said. "Whether you learn it or not is up to you."

"Oh yeah? What— Whoa! Huh?! Hang on!" Gil cried out and leapt in surprise.

What an overreaction. It's only a new advanced spell.

"Pipe down, Gil," the albatross said and then shifted her attention to me. "So?"

"I want you to intervene the moment things look dangerous," I said.

"I won't need to with you there."

"Oh... Thanks." I made no attempt to conceal my embarrassment. Had our positions been reversed... I supposed it would have fallen to me to rein her in.

"We might use a new spell," I whispered in her ear. "And I'm fairly certain that Caren and the girls have an extravagant strategy in mind."

"Oh really?" she whispered back. "You haven't forgotten our *promise*, have you?"

"I haven't," I replied. She would lend a hand if the need arose, whatever she said.

"Man," Gil remarked, "I haven't seen you off in your own world like that in ages. What brought this on?"

"Dear brother and sister!" Lynne exclaimed. "Make room for me!"

"You're not ready, and don't think I won't incinerate you," Lydia replied. “Gil, stay away from Felicia! Take one step closer to her, and I’ll spread your secrets around the whole department.”

“G-Got it!” Gil said. “I’ll give her a wide berth!”

It sounded as though Lydia had taken a liking to Felicia. Emma wasn’t the only Leinster or Howard maid to show her devoted service either. The girl was apparently a natural magnet for affection.

And so, I proceeded after the other combatants, staff in hand. I couldn’t help but wonder what the future had in store for me.

“Mr. Al—” Stella approached me as soon as I entered the training ground but came to an abrupt halt before reaching me. “Wh-Where did you get that outfit?” she asked.

“Please, don’t bring it up,” I replied. “I wasn’t given a choice in the matter.”

The young noblewoman fell silent.

“Stella?” I asked.

“Y-Yes?! Y-You look dashing... Like a fairy-tale magician.” She clasped her hands as if in prayer as she spoke.

“Thank you very much,” I awkwardly replied. Her touching compliment did something to assuage the mental blow I had suffered, although it was also providing a substantial boost to our opponents’ morale. Tina and Ellie’s silence was unnerving, while Caren was sharpening her dagger and muttering something about its edge in a way that I wished she would stop.

I snapped Stella out of her abstraction, and we lined up in the center of the arena.

“Anna,” I called.

The Leinsters’ head maid appeared with a cheerful “Everyone’s favorite Anna, at your service!”

“Would you please give the signal to begin?”

“Certainly, sir!”

Before our battle could commence, I launched a number of magical orbs at Tina, Ellie, and Caren. Caren dispelled them all with ease and an interrogative “Allen?” Ellie dealt with most of her orbs as well. Tina, however, failed to dispel the greater part of them.

“Ellie managed to stop roughly eighty percent of those at her best casting speed,” I told them. “If you’re too slow, I’ll dismantle your spells. Don’t expect me to allow you to deploy advanced or supreme spells either.”

Tina responded with silence, Ellie with a groan, and Caren with a curt “That won’t be a problem.”

“You can activate them if you break through my interference,” I added, “and I won’t dismantle them if you get that far. Bear that in mind.” It was an announcement that brought little gasps of realization from Tina and Ellie. Ellie, in particular, seemed to be getting the hang of the exercise already.

Stella lightly tapped her rapier and wand, but I could still detect hesitation in our opponents.

“Tina. Ellie. Caren,” I called. “Come here.”

The trio complied with a “Wh-What for?” from Tina, a “Y-Yessir!” from Ellie, and a questioning look from Caren. To their evident surprise, I touched the two younger girls’ ribbons and Caren’s necklace.

“All three of you command such powerful magical defenses that I doubt you’ll be in any danger,” I said, “but I’ll protect you if I judge that you’re at risk. So please, show me the full extent of your abilities.”

“We will!” came the chorus of answers.

“Please step back,” Anna interjected. We obediently retreated and faced each other at a distance. “Now...”

The wait is almost over. I wonder how the girls have grown under Caren’s instruction.

The head maid lowered her hand. “Begin!”

Stella unsheathed her weapons. I, meanwhile, struck the ground with the ferrule of my staff and silently cast a spell. It was time to check my students’ progress!

*

“Begin!” the Leinsters’ head maid shouted before immediately vanishing.

I drew my rapier and wand, then promptly began weaving several spells as I sank into a combat stance.

“Stella!” Mr. Allen shouted to me. “Watch your right!”

I responded by twisting my body to evade two dark shapes that shot past me. They were a pair of black lions about as large as medium-sized dogs...and they had sprung from Ellie’s shadow! Were they magical creatures adapted to combat?!

“H-Hang in there!” Ellie shouted. Her lions roared in answer and turned to face me.

Caren drew her dagger and then swung it horizontally, while Ellie spread her arms. Sparks of violet lightning and faint gusts of wind blanketed the entire arena.

Large-scale magical camouflage? But why?

I had no time to ponder the question—the trio were concentrating their attacks on Mr. Allen.

"Allen!"

"H-Have at you!"

Caren and Ellie speedily closed in on him, the former swinging her dagger and the latter her fists.

"Prepare yourself, sir!" Tina shouted as she deployed a fierce barrage of spells. The majority of her numerous spell formulae collapsed, but some activated and unleashed a hail of icy projectiles. She must have planned to overwhelm Mr. Allen with sheer quantity.

Just as we'd predicted, Caren and Ellie were engaging us at close and medium distance while Tina provided long-range support. The magical creatures represented their only attack on me.

"Whoa there." Mr. Allen responded with evasive action, but Caren gave chase with Ellie—and the storm of ice shots—hot on her heels.

He never bothered to dodge during our— Forget that; I need to concentrate!

I waved my wand and fired a rapid burst of the elementary ice spell Divine Ice Shot, keeping one lion pinned down while I sprinted toward the other. My target charged at me. It leapt and swiped at me with its forepaws, but I ducked to avoid the blow, thrust my rapier into its belly, and fired an icy blast from my wand—a direct hit that caused the lion to disintegrate.

That's one taken—

The second lion wove its way through my barrage of ice shots and bore down on me from behind. I half turned, bringing my rapier scything into its belly!

Two! I did it!

All of a sudden, some advice that Mr. Allen had given me in the café flitted through my mind: "You're never more vulnerable than the moment you think you've succeeded." I cast a spell behind me without even looking, bringing down the third lion with a piercing arrow of ice. I scrutinized my surroundings, but that seemed to be the last of them.

"Caren," Mr. Allen remarked, "your attacks need more variety. I'd suggest mixing in a kick or two. And I'm amazed that neither you nor Ellie have cast a spell since that camouflage. What are you scheming?"

My ordinarily coolheaded best friend growled as she was put at a disadvantage and forced to retreat in the blink of an eye. A moment later, Ellie let out a shout as she attempted to take Mr. Allen by surprise with an attack from behind.

"You have a good eye for openings, Ellie." The maid yelped in confusion as Mr. Allen caught her arm and sent her flying with a perfectly executed throw. "But your strike was sloppy, and, as I've warned you before, shouting ruins the element of surprise. Aren't you going to use any offensive spells? How about enchanting your fists or conjuring more magical creatures?"

Ellie maintained excellent posture in midair and landed in front of Tina, impressed but not surprised. I could practically see a big tail wagging behind her.

Tina's ice shots pelted Mr. Allen from all sides, but mirrors of flame materialized to intercept them, much to her apparent consternation.

"You pretend to be surprised," Mr. Allen said, leaping to a spot beside me just before icicles sprouted from the ground where he had once stood, "and then strike with an intermediate spell under the cover of enough elementary spells to ignore my interference. Not a bad plan."

Tina fumed. I was astounded. Mr. Allen was incredible! He far surpassed my wildest imaginings.

"Stella!" he instructed me. "Stick to the plan."

"I will!" I replied. "Tina! Ellie! Caren! I can't blame you for taking me lightly, but don't forget—I've had the benefit of Mr. Allen's uninterrupted instruction. I'm more capable than you think!"

There was genuine fighting spirit in the trio's eyes. This was where the real battle began, and I would do what I could to the best of my ability! I waved my wand and cast the elementary ice spell Divine Ice Arrow. Then, while it flew at Ellie, I sped toward Tina as fast as my legs would take me.

"You'll have to do better than that!"

"I-I'll stop her!"

Tina and Ellie attempted to intercept me with spells, but every one of their formulae vanished.

"Too slow," Mr. Allen remarked. "That won't do."

"That many at once?!" Tina exclaimed.

Ellie let out a cry as my spells bombarded the ground around her. I'd succeeded in pinning her down, which only left...

"Ellie!" Tina shouted, whipping toward me. "H-How dare you!"

"That's enough," I said, closing in on Tina and thrusting at her with my rapier. A silver-gray shape appeared ahead of me, followed by the harsh ring of metal against metal. Caren had blocked my strike with her dagger, but a split second later...

"I'm your opponent, Caren."

"Allen!" Caren cried in surprise as Mr. Allen instantly closed the distance between us and interrupted our struggle with a thrust of his staff. He gave me a wink.

Understood!

I pursued the retreating Tina while continuing to bombard Ellie with spells. My aim was imprecise, and it would take more than an elementary spell to pierce Ellie's magical defenses, but it was still enough to frighten her. She let out a high-pitched whine as she frantically struggled to avoid or deflect my attacks but returned none of her own. This was my chance!

"Ellie! Caren!" Tina shouted, weaving support spells in an effort to free the other two from their predicaments.

"Focus on yourself!" Caren responded—and in that brief moment of distraction, Mr. Allen unleashed a series of strikes with his staff. She stopped a point-blank fireball with her dagger, but it still sent her flying.

"I'm impressed you blocked that," Mr. Allen remarked.

I wove my way through Tina's sporadic spells to engage her in close combat. She was in range of my rapier!

"I-I can't believe you separated Ellie and me on your own! That was amazing, Stella!" my sister exclaimed in astonishment and praise as she blocked my thrusts with her rod and leapt backward.

"You're wrong!" I retorted. "I couldn't have done it without Mr. Allen!"

Despite Mr. Allen's interference, Tina managed to ensconce herself within an array of Divine Ice Mirrors and Divine Ice Walls several dozen layers thick. She was trying to put distance between us, but I continued my advance nonetheless, and with a flurry of thrusts, I shattered her mirrors, smashed her walls, and swatted her projectiles aside. I was slowly but surely overwhelming her. My wand wasn't idle either; I hadn't stopped casting spells to keep Ellie at bay.

Mr. Allen and Caren had evidently taught my sister defensive measures to suit her fighting style, because she was formidable! I could hardly believe that she was the same girl who had spent her days reading in the greenhouse.

Ellie and Caren attempted to come to Tina's defense, but their cries of "Lady Tina!" and "Tina!" respectively were cut short as my magic and Mr. Allen stopped them in their tracks.

"Not so fast!" I shouted.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mr. Allen asked.

We can do this.

I became certain of that as I sliced through the few chains of ice that Tina had unleashed on me in desperation. I could overwhelm her, and then the duel would be two against two. We might not even need to use the secret weapon we had been preparing under cover of Mr. Allen's magic. His camouflage was so perfect that they didn't seem to have noticed a thing, and he had accomplished it using far less mana than Caren and Ellie's joint effort. When it came to his control of magic, Mr. Allen might have even surpassed my father.

The next instant, Tina's hail of icy projectiles abruptly doubled in number. Just what had— There was a tremendous surge of mana.

"Stella! Jump!" Mr. Allen cried, urgency in his voice.

I dodged to my right with all my strength as a violet flash passed between Tina and me, gouging a track in the dirt. The impact sent me flying, but a warm body caught me. A moment later, there came a thunderous roar. They had played their trump card sooner than expected!

"Are you all right?" Mr. Allen asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

"I'll be honest," Caren interjected, staring at us with eyes turned violet, "I didn't take you seriously. I'm done holding back, so get ready for what I can really do."

She was surrounded by lightning in the shape of a wolf's head. This was the power of the atavistic throwbacks occasionally born to the wolf clan! They possessed the unique ability to envelop themselves in magic and gain a portion of its power, although only for a short time. In Caren's case, that meant Lightning Apotheosis, a power derived from lightning magic and distinguished by incomparable speed. It was also the thing that had made me despair of ever competing with her.

Tina and Ellie fell into position behind Caren, and I readied my rapier and wand as tension filled the air. Only Mr. Allen remained nonchalant.

“Tina, Ellie,” Caren said.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” came two replies.

“I’ll stop my brother. You two focus on Stella. Apart from that, remember the plan!”

Mr. Allen chuckled. “Does that have something to do with how you and Ellie have hardly cast a spell while Tina tries to activate as many as she can? Is your tactician...Her Little Highness, perhaps?”

“Wh-Who are you calling ‘little’?!” Tina burst out. “I’m a growing young woman! Before you know it, I’ll be an adult, and then I’ll be your— *Mph*!”

“L-Lady Tina,” Ellie said, clapping a hand over my sister’s mouth.

“Concentrate, and don’t let him distract you,” Caren cut in. “When Allen fights, his words are part of his arsenal. If you let him get to you, the battle will be over before you know it.” She clapped her hands with a crackle, and the younger girls’ gazes steadied.

My best friend tossed her dagger skyward, and violet lightning gathered around it, transforming the weapon into a long spear with a cruciform tip. She caught and brandished it in one hand. Violet lightning crackled across the whole arena, pressing against the barrier. Her mana beggared belief.

“I see you’re going all out,” Mr. Allen airily remarked. “I hope you don’t run out of steam in the first half.”

“If I tried to conserve my strength against you,” Caren replied, “the fight would be over long before I wore myself out.”

“In that case, perhaps I should cast some spells of my own.” Mr. Allen conjured a myriad of the elementary light spell Divine Light Shot with a sweep of his staff. They bore down on Caren, but then, all of a sudden, she was gone. The next thing I knew, Mr. Allen was in front of me, stopping her lightning-quick thrust with his staff.

I’m her target?!

Her spell landed behind me, where it raised a cloud of dust. How could she be faster than light magic? Violet lightning formed between the pair of them and scattered across the arena.

“I won’t leave you any openings, and I won’t hold back,” Caren said. “I’m going to win, and I won’t even give you a chance to cast that spell you’ve been preparing on the sly.”

“Spell? What spell?” Mr. Allen replied. “Is it me, or are you even faster than you used to be?”

“I’m not content to let you protect me forever! Now I can protect you!”

“What sort of big brother would I be if I ever stopped trying to keep you safe? There.” Mr. Allen knocked Caren’s spear aside and began to deploy a spell.

“You won’t use any magic on my watch!” Caren shouted, shredding his formulae with a series of strikes too fast for my eyes to follow. Mr. Allen set about deftly parrying them as he continued his flippant remarks.

They’re too far beyond me.

Ellie snapped me out of my daze with an axe kick and a loud cry. I scrambled to dodge, and her heel split the ground.

“Don’t forget about me!” Tina shouted as a storm of elementary spells came into view. She had activated them all in a single rapid burst.

I need to shift focus! This is where the real battle begins!

*

“So, this is what Caren is capable of...” I murmured in amazement as I beheld the vice president’s lightning-fast thrusts shift the flow of battle. “I knew that she was strong from how she utterly crushed me the one time we sparred, but I never imagined she could go toe to toe with my dear brother.”

“Lynne, your tea is getting cold,” my dear sister warned me as she sipped her own. My dear brother’s wooden sword and wand were at her side, tied with a scarlet ribbon.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I replied, picking up my cup.

“Caren is fairly strong. She can put up a reasonable fight against me one on one.”

“Against *you,* dear sister?” I was speechless. She could challenge Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, unaided...?

“Still, she’s no match for him.”

Caren brought her spear of lightning down with tremendous speed, followed the swing with a series of rapid thrusts, then finished with a slash utilizing the prongs of her spear's cross-shaped point as she withdrew it. Her spear tip extended, altering its range, and… It was no use; I couldn't quite follow her strikes. And in the face of that blistering onslaught, my dear brother was…

"Smiling…?"

He was using his staff to parry, block, and occasionally counterattack as he battled—practically danced—with Caren. A scarlet ribbon fluttered with his every movement.

My dear sister set her teacup on its saucer with an audible clink. "How dare he show that face to anyone but me?" she said. "I'll have to punish my failure of a servant later."

I forced a laugh. "Dear sister, how is he weathering that onslaught from Caren?" I asked.

She looked confused for a moment before replying. "Oh, he must not have taught you yet."

"What do you mean?"

My dear sister extended her left arm and pointed to my dear brother with a fine, shapely finger. Despite her best efforts, she could not keep her affection from showing. I experienced the faintest of pangs in my chest.

"Watch the way his staff moves carefully," she said.

"A-All right."

Caren's attacks were simply too fast, but not a single one of them reached my dear brother before— That was it. His staff was always ahead of the lightning-quick thrusts.

"He's moving…*before* she strikes?!"

"When Caren cloaks herself in lightning magic, tracking her with your eyes isn't worth the effort, so he's using mana to predict her moves. He's not casting spells because he's such a softy."

I was stunned. My dear sister made it sound so simple, but the technique demanded staggering precision. Was there anything my dear brother *couldn't* do?

"Don't overthink it," my dear sister added. "It's not as though it has no weaknesses, anyway."

"Weaknesses? Such as?"

"Watch."

Her slender finger shifted to point at Tina, Ellie, and Lady Stella. Lady Stella was attempting to force Tina into close combat while keeping Ellie at bay with magic, as she had earlier in the duel, but it wasn't going so well for her.

"We can do this! I know we can!" Tina cried. "Ellie!"

"Y-Yes'm!" her maid replied and then let out a yell of exertion.

The pair had regrouped following their separation. Now, Lady Stella was confronting Ellie, who was acting as Tina's front line and shield. They appeared evenly matched in melee combat, but Miss First Place had significantly stepped up her magical support in comparison to her earlier efforts, and the ferocious bombardment was taking its toll. This situation brought the difference in their firepower to the fore.

Tina wasn't casting advanced or supreme spells, but she had learned her elementary and intermediate spells from my dear brother, and she was taking full advantage of her mana to lay down a literal ice storm of covering fire. She appeared to be putting quantity before quality and exclusively casting elementary spells, but that was beside the point. Still, why was she able to bring this power to bear now, when she hadn't earlier?

Oh, of course!

I looked at my dear brother and Caren, and then at my dear sister, who was snacking on a sweet. "It looks like you figured it out," she remarked.

"My dear brother was providing support earlier, wasn't he?" I asked. "He was impeding Tina's and Ellie's spells. But he can't do that as well while predicting Caren's movements."

"He uses his nerves for prediction," she replied. "Besides, this is Stella's fight; I'm sure he's decided against giving her too much support. Caren and Ellie have been pouring their efforts into magical camouflage since the start of the duel, and Ellie has set a lot of traps. That girl's silence is impressive. Meanwhile, Tiny is activating as many spells as she can to draw attention. She's a crafty one, although she'll be a laughingstock if the duel ends before her little scheme comes together."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Watch closely and think it through for yourself."

Down in the training ground, Lady Stella was falling into an unfavorable position—Ellie was impeding her efforts to bring the battle to close quarters, and Tina's ferocious support was driving her back. The distance between her and her opponents was steadily becoming fixed despite her best efforts to counterattack. The disparity in mana made her disadvantage in a head-on clash inevitable, and now that the situation had reached this point...

“She has no chance,” my dear sister said.

“What?”

“Isn’t that what you were thinking?” She flashed a smile at me, and I nodded my assent. “They’re caught in his trap. And if you thought Stella was out of the fight, then I’d bet those two are thinking the same thing.”

“B-But...”

“There’s been a change on the board.”

Caren retreated, knocked back by my dear brother. Her spear reverted to the dagger it had begun as, and lightning was no longer shrouding her body. The storm of spells that had been assailing Lady Stella vanished as well. The battle was deadlocked— No.

The student council president was battered and breathing heavily, but she had not lost the will to fight. Just the opposite, if anything. My dear brother stood behind her, looking his usual self, but his affectionate gaze took in everyone in the training ground.

That’s not fair! What about me?!

“Now, how will this play out?” my dear sister wondered aloud. “If you ask me, this duel won’t be over till it’s over.”

*

Caren retreated, having run out of time, and I resumed my interference. Stella was hanging on by the skin of her teeth, so I cast a quick healing spell on her as I asked, “Are you prepared?”

“Anytime!” she called back, keeping her gaze fixed straight ahead. Tina, Ellie, and Caren still seemed equally determined to keep fighting.

How will the next move change the board?

Caren couldn’t use Lightning Apotheosis multiple times in quick succession, so she and our other opponents would need a Blizzard Wolf to stop Stella’s secret weapon. Against any ordinary opponents, our victory would be assured. Unfortunately, my trusty students and sister were anything but ordinary.

The student council president touched her school beret. Chunks of ice came hurtling toward her, but I blocked them with fire.

“M-Mr. Allen?” she asked.

“Take deep breaths,” I said. “Relax.”

“R-Right!”

As we spoke, a hail of icy projectiles got past my interference and struck around us. Tina was finally adding icicles to the mix, it seemed.

"Not so loud," I chided, putting a finger to my lips. "Your sister needs time for her breathing exercises."

"Sir," Tina shot back, "I know that Stella is pretty, but two-timing is a serious offense!"

"You'll ruin my reputation, but thank you for waiting. Stella."

"I'm ready now!" Stella shouted, stepping forward with her rapier and wand crossed.

Now, let's give them a surprise.

I halted the multilayered magical camouflage I had been maintaining since the start of the duel, unleashing an eruption of azure mana flecked with white as three massive spell formulae rose into the air before Stella. They represented a pair of gargantuan icicles, countless gleaming, frosty spears, and a ferocious blizzard.

The young woman whispered the names of the spells: "Twin Icicle Pillars. Swift Ice Lances. Imperial Ice Blizzard."

"Advanced spells?!" Tina and Ellie exclaimed, taken aback by the sudden turn of events.

"I knew it..." Caren muttered.

"I don't think you have time to waste on shock," I told them. "How will you defend against three advanced spells cast simultaneously?"

"Tina! Ellie! Caren!" Stella shouted. "This is all the power I can muster! Stop it if you can!"

Bitter cold raged through the training ground. I was just thinking that I had better prepare to intervene when Caren defied my expectations by entering Lightning Apotheosis for a second time! She conjured a spear of lightning and planted herself in the way of the blast with astonishing speed.

Stella unleashed her spells while Caren became a flash of light. "You won't beat me!" they roared in unison. It was a clash of pride, and they crashed into each other in the center of the arena, creating a shock wave as ice and lightning intermingled. I backed away, deeply impressed by my sister's continuous progress. Still, she must have been nearing her limit, because the violet lightning she had been laying down throughout the duel had vanished.

...Hm? I know this mana.

With a spirited cry, Ellie came hurtling down on me out of the air, her legs wrapped in wind.

A levitation spell?!

I used my staff to block, but chains of wind closed in on me from all directions, holding me motionless for a fraction of a second. As the breeze faded, four black lions sprang out of the ground to set upon me from four sides. I quickly dismantled the chains, pelted the lions with Divine Fire Shots, and pushed Ellie back...but I could hardly believe she had kept so much concealed for so long.

Of course!

Ellie had spent the beginning of the duel fighting almost exclusively with martial arts—no doubt so that she could focus on making her spells even more silent than usual while also working with Caren to camouflage them. Tina had similarly been casting only elementary spells so that the three of them together could create this fraction of a second.

"I-I did it!" the maid cried with delight as she spun and landed. "N-Next!"

A huge spell formula appeared beneath my feet—the advanced wind spell Imperial Storm Tornado. The girls had caught me off guard!

I swung my staff in a wide arc, rapidly casting defensive spells of every element. I couldn't dismantle the advanced spell, so I would need to evade it while diverting its force. I leapt farther back, but Ellie took advantage of my crucial vulnerability by fiercely closing in on me and assuming a combat stance suited to extreme close quarters.

"Take this!" she shouted, launching a flurry of strikes and kicks. She changed elements with each blow, forcing me to waste time adjusting to her. It was an undisguised attempt to buy time, which meant...

Behind the maid, Tina was holding her rod aloft as innumerable ice crystals filled the air around her. She had planned all of this!

"I won't let you get in Lady Tina's way!" Ellie shouted, activating all the spells that she had laid down across the arena in a single burst. Magical arrows of wind rained down on me from all sides, easily surpassing the speed of my interference.

What now? What should I even say in this situation? These girls are truly, simply unbelievable!

A supreme spell had the potential to end the duel. Only Tina could cast one, but she would struggle to do so at the speed I demanded. That was why they had coordinated all their actions—what was impossible for one became achievable with two or three. Tina had probably predicted what kind of handicap I would set and worked even that into her plan. She may not have been eager to duel her sister, but she had no qualms about bringing all of her talents to bear against me. I recalled the promise I had made with her—that she "need not practice restraint or keep anything bottled up where I was concerned"—and our exchange in the Leinsters' inner courtyard, when she had declared, "I'm going to stand by you!"

Of course. I should have remembered what kind of girl I've been tutoring. She always keeps her promises.

While I was busy blocking and dodging Ellie's strikes and dismantling or neutralizing her spells, Tina shouted a sharp command: "Ellie! Caren!"

Both girls swiftly retreated. It appeared that Caren had successfully weathered all three advanced spells—the trio must have even anticipated that Stella would cast them simultaneously.

A snowy gust struck me as the supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf materialized with a howl that shook the air. "Sir! Stella!" Tina shouted, pointing her rod at us. "Victory is ours!" She was absolutely confident, and given the stipulation that I would not dismantle any advanced or supreme spell that she managed to cast, she was right to be. Lady Tina Howard was a genius.

"We missed our chance to win," Stella said, "but even so...!" She held her rapier and wand at the ready, resolved to fight even against insurmountable odds.

I'll need to demonstrate my conviction as well, I thought as I donned a deliberately strained smile and approached her. "You don't need me to tell you that our situation is hopeless," I said. "Will you keep going nonetheless?"

"I will! I can still fight!"

She's more determined than ever. Duke Walter, your daughter has inherited the Howards' martial valor.

"Stella," I said, "do you want to win?"

For a moment, she looked nonplussed. Then, she replied, "Absolutely!"

"Well said. Give me your hand."

Stella looked startled. "What? M-Mr. Allen—"

"Please forgive my impertinence for the duration of this duel."

"O-Of course!"

I took her left hand and slowly linked our mana. It was a shallow connection, but I still felt her elation, her desperation, and her intense desire to win. I wanted to help her achieve that desire.

"Tina!" Caren shouted.

"I know!" Tina responded and swung her rod down. "Here goes nothing!"

With a mighty howl, her Blizzard Wolf charged toward us, turning the whole training ground whiter with every step. I couldn't suppress a grin, although I suspected that she had failed her assignment to better control the force of her spells.

"Mr. Allen!" Stella cried.

"Let's show them what you're capable of," I said.

Stella and I gripped her wand together as shining ice crystals—far less similar to Tina's than they first appeared—took form around us. I prayed that our effort would succeed as we waved the wand and activated our spell.

The onrushing wolf collided violently with something, kicking up a fierce blizzard that transformed half the arena into an ice field. I shielded Stella as I prepared another spell. Thanks to our link, we had no difficulty keeping on more or less the same page.

This is our next move. Keep enough mana in reserve for your final attack.

The young lady in my arms responded with an emphatic nod. Ellie, meanwhile, created a sudden gust that restored visibility.

"What?!" Tina exclaimed, betraying her surprise as Ellie cried, "Wh-What's that?!" Caren remained silent, but she was just as wide-eyed as her comrades. Lynne and Gil were equally shocked, if their resounding shouts of "Huh? What? What?!" and "What the—?!" were anything to go by. I wasn't going to look at the albatross—not for anything.

The supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf remained recognizable, but it had been neutralized. A lone hawk soared through the sky above, beating its wings of ice.

Stella and I waved our wand again, prompting another chorus of reactions.

"I-I don't believe it."

"Ooh..."

"Allen, Stella..."

"I-Is that even possible?"

"No way. There's just no way."

A second hawk alighted as I grinned at the shaken trio. "Let's settle this. These paired birds are my latest invention—the supreme ice and light spell Frost-Gleam Hawks," I announced, causing even greater shock. "Oh, and one other thing..."

The twin hawks entered a sharp dive and dissolved into Stella. Her rapier glowed bright azure, as did the cluster of eight-petaled ice crystals that floated around the tip of her wand to defend her.

"An azure shield?!" Tina shouted. "Sir!"

"Wh-What?!" Ellie cried.

"You're always one step ahead," Caren grumbled.

Their reactions were matched by a "I-Isn't that...?" from Lynne and a "Th-This is..." from Gil.

I had seen the formulae of great spells on two occasions—first Frigid Crane and then Radiant Shield. They had been encrypted and indecipherable to the point that I couldn't replicate them even partially, but I had succeeded in touching a fragment of their essence—or maybe "foundation" was nearer the mark. At least, I thought I had. Magic was likely far freer than we believed it to be. And if so, there was nothing to stop me from orienting a supreme spell or secret art toward multiple elements.

"This is the *real* Azure Sword—not the fake I've used—and the Azure Shield, a secret art that I thought up," I declared. "This is all the help I can offer. The rest..."

"Is in my hands!" Stella shouted as she stepped forward, her rapier and wand at the ready. She held her Azure Sword horizontally and added, "Tina! Ellie! Caren! Have at you!"

A white and azure flash sped through the air. Tina hastily raised hundreds of mirrors and walls of ice, Ellie launched a barrage of more fireballs than I could count, and Caren hurled a massive orb of lightning. The resulting collision engulfed the whole training ground in a powerful shock wave.

A cloud of ice fog obscured my view until a barrage of Divine Lightning Spears and Divine Wind Spears tore through it to rain down on Stella. Her Azure Shields swerved to intercept, deflecting the spells back at wild angles. Caren and Ellie struggled to intercept their own ricocheting attacks with startled cries of "Automated defenses?!" and "O-Oh dear!"

The majority of Tina's ice walls had been cleaved in twain, while her mirrors were nowhere to be seen. Stella's offense and defense both left nothing to be desired. Her next strike would no doubt be the last, and yet...

"You won't beat me!" Caren shouted, her eyes turning deep violet as she entered Lightning Apotheosis for a third time. "I refuse to be defeated! We're going to win!"

"Y-Yes, we will!" Ellie chimed in and began to weave the strongest Imperial Storm Tornado she could muster. It would have been tactless of me to interfere.

Tina, meanwhile, removed the ribbon from her hair and tied it to her rod with a spirited and undaunted smile. "Sir. Stella," she said. "Don't you know? 'Always save the best for last.'" She raised her rod and prayed. "Please, give me strength. I don't need much...but give me the power to answer Stella's courage and stand at Mr. Allen's side!"

I... I know this feeling!

Tina's mana had suddenly linked with mine, and without my say in the matter. I sensed confusion, and with that...there came a question.

"MAY I?"

I answered, and mana whirled as another Blizzard Wolf materialized, this one even more powerful than the last. Its spell formula was the established one with which I'd become familiar, so it appeared that the entity had provided only slight assistance.

"Ellie!" Tina shouted, gripping her rod in both hands.

"Yes'm!" The maid placed her hands on the rod as well and then fired her Imperial Storm Tornado into the wolf. Their mana converged, producing a Blizzard Wolf cloaked in an ice storm.

A collaborative compound spell?!

I'd included the technique in the notebooks I'd given them, but never had I expected them to master it. These girls really were something else. I was so overcome with joy that I almost wept.

"Tina," Caren called, conjuring her long spear and stepping forward.

"If this works," the young noblewoman replied, straining to keep her spell under control, "it'll be the same as a ducal house's secret art. I know it's theoretically possible, but it's too dangerous, even for you, Caren. Let's use this spell to settle things!"

"Stella is my best friend and your big sister. She's pushing herself to the limit, so I want to—*need to*—respond in kind. Please."

"B-But..." Tina stared at me, and Stella glanced back at me as well. Both sisters' eyes were pleading.

I wouldn't be much of a teacher if I made my students do all the work.

I touched the scarlet ribbon on my staff and focused, strengthening my shallow link with Tina and sending her a message. She immediately consented, closed her eyes, and made a small, contemplative sound that seemed out of place in the arena. "Very well," she announced. "Let's do it, Caren! Ellie!"

"Thank you," Caren replied.

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie chimed in.

Tina swung down her rod, and the Blizzard Wolf barreled straight into Caren. I established a deep link with my sister and set about bringing the raging wolf under control.

"A-Allen?!" she exclaimed telepathically.

"I'll explain later!" I replied in kind.

This is a challenge, even with added control via Tina beforehand! Was I too rash?!

Then, I realized—or was made to realize—something as I recalled the headmaster's words: "It's the polar opposite of evil." I stopped wrestling with the spell and simply made a heartfelt request for it to comply. It was then that I heard a cry—not the lamentation that I'd heard at the Howard mansion, but a song of gratitude for my realization.

The ice storm concentrated into a spear of violet, green, and azure—a compound of three elements! The whole arena was shaking with a force that threatened to destroy it along with the surrounding barriers. I couldn't maintain three simultaneous links much longer, so I severed my connections to Tina and Caren.

That should suffice to set the stage. As for the rest...

Stella thrust her wand forward, and her Azure Shields reshaped themselves into an eight-sided drill. "Caren!" she shouted.

"Stella!" my sister roared back, advancing one step and leaning forward with her spear clutched in both hands. The pair were about to begin their final clash. Both had exhausted their mana, meaning that this truly was the endgame.

For the second time that day, the two girls collided in the center of the training ground. A snow-laden gust roared past me, and thunder rumbled with piercing intensity. The powerful barrier passed its limit, and some of the trees in the garden, along with parts of the buildings, suffered freezing or lightning strikes.

Stella screamed at the top of her lungs and thrust out her Azure Sword, which she had held in reserve, to supplement her crumbling Azure Shield. Mana shrieked under the strain as the ground in the center of the arena began to cave in.

“Forward!” The young lady poured out her feelings. “Forward! I don’t want any regrets, so I’ll just keep advancing!”

The greatest shock wave of the day filled my view with white, and I sensed one person being knocked down. I blew the blizzard away with a wave of my staff, and as I did so, fires sprang up to thaw everything that had frozen. Lydia was lifting her teacup slightly.

In the center of the arena stood the young woman with long platinum hair. Caren had retreated—Stella had successfully driven her back. Then, the young woman staggered.

"Stella!" Tina cried, flinging aside her rod. Caren echoed her and likewise abandoned her dagger, which had reverted to its original form. Ellie joined in with a shriek of "Lady Stella!" as all three rushed toward the daring but utterly exhausted noblewoman, who let her rapier and wand fall to the earth.

"Well done," I said, catching Stella from behind as she tottered.

"Mr. Allen..." she murmured, looking up at me. "Did I do enough?"

"Yes. You proved what you're capable of."

She giggled weakly. "Thank you."

"A-Are you all right, Stella?!" Tina cried as she and Ellie ran up and threw themselves at the young woman.

"L-Lady Stella," the maid wailed, "how could you be so reckless?!"

"Stella," Caren said slowly. She alone had resisted the urge to leap on Stella, and she was holding a clenched fist pressed to her chest.

"I'm sorry, and thank you," the exhausted young woman said, giving the two younger girls a pat on the head. She then looked at me. I nodded and relinquished my hold on her, whereupon she stood firm unaided, approached Caren, and embraced her.

"S-Stella?" my sister stuttered.

"I'm sorry," Stella said. "I'm so sorry, Caren. Sorry for making selfish demands and for making trouble for you when I pushed myself. I always knew you were incredible; I don't stand a chance against you right now, but...I'm going to surpass you! I refuse to leave you alone!" After a pause, she asked, "Will you forgive me?"

Caren was silent for a moment, and then— "You dummy. You great big dummy. If you were going to do something like this, you should have spoken to me ahead of time, and...and..." Her words devolved into sobs, which then became a cry of “S-Stellaaa!” as my kind little sister buried her face in her best friend’s chest and wept.

Tina and Ellie, who had been nervously watching the scene, became teary-eyed as well. Not even a moment later, they began to sob and wail as they threw their arms around the pair.

I heard the sounds of ungainly running. “S-Stella! C-Caren!” Felicia shouted as she dove into the group, tears streaming down her face. “Th-Thank goodness! I was so worried about youuu!” Her entrance drew a startled squeal from Stella and a surprised “F-Felicia” from Caren. The sobs of all five girls then filled the training ground.

“Caren. Felicia,” Stella said a short while later. Her two best friends responded with questioning looks. “I want to ask a favor of you both. Will you hear me out?”

“Of course!” they replied in unison.

“You see, I’d like to visit all sorts of places that I’ve never been to before. Clothing stores, cafés, cake shops, diners, and...I want both of you to come with me. Even after you quit school, Felicia. Would you please?”

“Do you even have to ask?” was Caren’s reply.

“Let’s go!” Felicia added. “All three of us!”

“Thank you, Caren, Felicia,” Stella said. “I love you both.”

“S-Stella...” Caren stammered.

“We love you too!” Felicia wailed, and they all started crying again.

Even the younger girls chimed in. There came a wheedling “Won’t you go with me, Stella?” from Tina and an equally affection-seeking “B-Big Sis Stella, I w-want to go too...” from Ellie.

I’d say that’s settled, I thought and severed my mana link with Stella. I had never linked with three people at once before, and although I had managed to avoid collapsing, I still felt drained and wanted a rest.

All of a sudden, two Firebirds—one massive and the other on the small side—soared toward me. “Where do you think you’re going?” Lydia asked. “The fun part hasn’t even started yet.”

“Dear brother,” Lynne added, “it ought to be my turn next. How dare you!”

The Leinster sisters descended into the arena, both prepared for combat. Lydia was armed with my wooden sword and wand. I looked to Anna and Mrs. Walker for aid, but I had evidently misjudged them, as both responded with a simple thumbs-up. My only option was...

Gil! I'm in a bind and need your— What do you mean, "Another lovers' spat, man? And with her cute little sister in the mix this time? Ugh. I'd have to be nuts to stick my nose into that"? Stop grumbling and wipe that smirk off your face!

Lydia was holding the wooden sword and wand at the ready. "I've got something to ask you while you can still answer," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" I exclaimed. "A-And what would you like to know?"

Flames enveloped her blade. The Scarlet Sword?! It wasn't the full technique, but it was still alarming—as was the extraordinary number of spells she had already deployed.

I-I think I'll run.

"Dear brother," Lynne said the moment I turned my back, "you're not thinking of running away, are you? Would you really leave me out like that?"

I groaned, and the red-haired young noblewoman, who had circled around to cut off my retreat, flashed a faint smile. It must have been her Leinster blood at work, because the albatross was smiling prettily as well.

O-Oh dear.

"You linked mana with three of them at once, didn't you?" the albatross asked. "Why are you always so reckless?! What if you'd passed out?!"

"I'm sorry," I replied sheepishly, scratching my cheek. "But you see..." My words trailed off. It appeared that I had caused her genuine concern. Back when I'd decided to help Stella, I had known that Lydia would make a fuss and also that I might need to link mana. That was why I had made the albatross a promise.

"What?" she asked.

"I ended up linking mana," I said, "so as promised, you can stay over at my place every weeknight this—"

Lydia clamped a hand over my mouth. "H-How stupid can you be?!" she railed in a state of apparent panic. "Think before you speak! That was supposed to be our secret!"

"Dear brother and sister," Lynne said slowly as the light faded from her eyes, "we have matters to discuss. Tina! Ellie!"

Tina, to my great relief, was still fawning on Stella.

What's the matter, Ellie? You look like a little squirrel with your *cheeks all puffed up like that.*

"Allen, sir," the maid said sullenly, "you linked with everyone but me."

"Dear brother," Lynne chimed in, "you ought to redress this inequality."

"Th-The nerve of you!" Lydia roared.

I subsequently engaged in a lone battle against the fearsome trio that was Lynne and Ellie, who had fallen to darkness, and Lydia, who was swinging her sword and firing her spells at me to mask her embarrassment. And then, the Howard sisters joined the fray. Who would praise my valiant efforts?

What? I brought it on myself? Caren, Felicia, don't you see how hard I've tried?

Late that night, I sat on a couch in the Howard mansion and waited. Until recently, Tina, Ellie, and Lynne, all in their nightgowns, had been taking full advantage of the opportunity to demand my attention—as had Caren, Stella, and Felicia, who were also staying the night. Now, however, they were all sound asleep, the older girls sharing one bed and the younger girls another. Shockingly, they had all demanded that I carry them to their sleeping quarters. I resolved to forget the gleams in the Howard maids' eyes and the video orbs in their hands.

"Mmm..." the albatross murmured in her sleep beside me. "Don't make me worry... City of water..."

I had aroused my former underclassman's concerns as well. "That was one hell of a show you just put on, man!" he had said on our departure. "But the nobility's gonna be jealous of that new supreme spell and secret art for sure. Keep 'em under wraps for a while." He really was a good friend.

I stroked the little head resting in my lap.

"Mr. Allen, he's on the line," Mrs. Walker informed me from her station against the wall.

"Thank you," I replied with a nod and then swapped out my knees with a cushion. The albatross grumbled, but the transfer was a success.

"This is Allen," I said, taking the telephone receiver. "I'm sorry to bother you so late at night. Circumstances prevented me from calling earlier than— Yes, this concerns the matter I reported in my letter. I'll keep this brief."

I recalled the look of complete satisfaction on the young woman’s sleeping face. The idea that she lacked talent was positively risible.

“Lady Stella will make a fine heir to the Dukedom of Howard,” I said. “You have nothing to fear, Your Highness, Duke Walter Howard. Just one question—I don’t suppose you’d object to a different supreme spell and secret art?”

Epilogue

The Howards' indoor training ground was the site of a fierce battle early that morning. A staggering quantity of mana dominated the area, and its barrier, which was sturdier than the average military stronghold, was groaning under the strain. Two combatants collided in the center of the arena, as did plumes of flame and violet lightning as wooden sword met dagger.

"You're not half bad now," Lydia remarked. "I'm impressed, Caren—and I'm not just saying that as your sister-in-law."

"Your Highness really has an awful memory," Caren shot back. "You must be thinking of someone else, because I don't have a sister-in-law, and I never will!" After a brief pause, she added, "Lydia, if you have excuses for this morning, I'm willing to listen."

"He insisted that he wanted to sleep with me, and I couldn't get rid of him."

"Allen...?" Caren asked and turned to me. I merely shrugged my shoulders and responded in the negative.

I put her to bed in a different room. Also, that "never" might be a problem for me.

"Liar!" Caren shouted at the albatross, her violet sparks raging.

"It's the truth," Lydia countered. "I magnanimously granted his unspoken desire."

"Nonsense!" Caren retorted and fell back, tossing her dagger into the air and materializing her lightning spear.

Lydia rested the wooden sword in her right hand on her shoulder and twirled the wand in her left with evident unconcern. Had she forgotten that those were mine? "Fine. Give me your best shot," she said. "I'll indulge my unruly sister-in-law to be."

"I'll shut that shameless mouth of yours!"

They clashed again, and I reinforced the barrier out of concern that they would damage the mansion. Despite their argument, both of them were grinning. This was only a game, and the close rein they kept on their mana proved it. Still, I wished that they wouldn't overdo it.

Just then, the Howards' head maid entered and addressed me. "Mr. Allen."

"Good morning, Mrs. Walker. I'm sorry that we're using your facilities."

"That won't be an issue. Lady Stella wishes to see you. I'll keep an eye on things here, and the young ladies are still asleep, so make haste."

What is she trying to imply? I wondered as she passed me a note containing directions to a room. I glanced at Lydia and Caren, but they were still enjoying themselves.

"I'll be on my way, then," I said. "I suspect they'll stop once they get bored."

"I quite understand. You may rely upon me to delay them." The legendary maid to whom Anna apparently aspired sent me off with a respectful bow.

Now, what will Her Highness ask of me?

"Please come in," Stella's cheerful voice replied to my knock.

"Pardon me," I said. "Good mor—"

"Good morning, Mr. Allen."

The young woman seated in a chair was undeniably a beauty. She looked almost saintly with her gorgeous, blue-tinged platinum tresses glistening in the light, and her nightgown only added to the impact. Her charms were irresistible, unavoidable, and an even match for Lydia in just a shirt.

I fell silent, and she approached me with a quizzical look on her face. Then, she stood on tiptoe and touched my head.

"L-Lady Stella?" I asked.

She giggled. "You have such adorable bed hair. And just 'Stella' is enough." She paused for a beat and then said, "Mr. Allen."

I responded with a questioning look, but she faltered and seemed to hesitate.

"I didn't manage to win," she continued with hints of unease and of coaxing in her voice, "but I did try my best, so...would you do me that favor?"

"I certainly intend to," I replied. "Did you get a chance to speak with everyone?"

"I did. We had a long, long talk in bed yesterday. Caren and Felicia scolded me, while Tina and Ellie wouldn't let go of me." She giggled again. "Those two are such children."

Stella's smile was both gentle and dazzling. I supposed that she would be fine now.

"Mr. Allen," she said, resuming her seat and looking up at me.

"Yes?"

"Um... Didn't you used to do Caren's hair for her when you were little?"

"I'm surprised you know about that."

"I was a little jealous of it. Would you do mine?"

"But I'm out of practice."

"Liar. Tina and Ellie told me yesterday that you've done theirs for them."

"I can't do anything fancy," I warned her.

"I don't mind. I want you to do it." A moment later, she added, "Um... Please?"

"Your wish is my command, Your Highness, Lady Stella Howard."

I took up a position behind her, picked a brush off the table, and began gently untangling her hair, which was similar to Tina's and quite beautiful. The noblewoman twisted and turned as though I were tickling her but nevertheless seemed content.

"Stella," I said.

"Yes?" she chirped back.

"I spoke with Duke Walter last night."

"With my father?!" she exclaimed with a start.

"He asked me to deliver a message to you."

"Wait! Please give me a moment."

Stella took several deep breaths, but they must not have steadied her nerves, because she turned to look at me in appeal. These faces of hers were dangerous in the extreme. I patted her head, and she assumed an angelic smile worthy of Ellie.

"Go ahead," she said with a brief giggle.

"He left two messages. First, 'The Dukedom of Howard will pass to Stella Howard. My mind has never changed on that point, and her acquisition of a supreme spell and secret art makes me even more certain.'"

"B-But Mr. Allen, that was..."

"You defended against the strongest attack the three of them could mount on your own. I'm certain that you'll master the spell."

Stella fell silent for a moment. Then, she replied, "Yes, I will."

"And if you're ever in doubt?" I prompted her.

"I'll talk through it with you. And with Caren, Felicia, Tina, Ellie, and Lynne." After a moment, she added, "Lady Lydia is a bit, well..."

"Please do. We'll do all we can for you. Now, the second message."

I had finished brushing her hair, so I began braiding it. I hoped that it would turn out well—I hadn't really done anyone's hair except Lydia's in a long time, and I had only neatened up Tina's and Ellie's.

"'Come summer vacation, return home at any cost,'" I repeated.

"I promise," she slowly replied.

"And speaking as your father, he said, 'I'm sorry. I'm waiting for you.'"

She didn't respond in words, but a single tear rolled down her cheek. I supposed that the frosty relations between father and daughter had finally begun to thaw.

I finished the braid. Now, there was just the matter of what to tie it wi—

Stella held her ribbon out to me. "Would you please?" she asked.

"Of course," I replied and tied the sky-blue ribbon behind her head.

Done! And quite nicely too, if I do say so myself.

The noblewoman lowered her head in silence.

What's this?

I was beginning to panic when Stella turned to look at me. There were tears welling in her eyes.

"S-Stella?"

"Mr. Allen, thank you so much," she said. "To me, you really are a genuine—"

The door opened to admit a petite girl with platinum hair. She was still half asleep, and her nightgown was rumpled.

"Good morning to you both," Tina said. She sleepily walked up to her older sister, threw her arms around her waist, and rested her head in her lap. "I was worried that you'd gone off somewhere, Stella."

"I'm sorry," Stella replied, gently stroking her younger sister's head. "I won't leave you." I hoped that this meant all was back to normal between them.

Now, Tina—you've worked very hard, so let's tidy up that bed hair *and—*

"No! Me first! Isn't that right, dear brother?"

A girl with disheveled red hair stood proudly in the doorway. She was followed by a sleepy-looking Felicia, who didn't seem to have recovered from her exhaustion yet. Felicia appeared flustered by the discovery that Tina was already hugging Stella, but she soon took a seat on the couch and began to doze with her arms wrapped around a cushion.

Tina stared blankly for a moment, then bolted awake. "L-Lynne!" she exclaimed. "I-I don't believe it! You were sound asleep and drooling just a moment ago!"

"I was *not* drooling," Lynne retorted.

"You were too! And your nightgown was hiked up over your belly button!"

"You complained that you were exhausted and went to bed in nothing but your under—"

Tina screamed to drown out her classmate. "Watch what you say in front of Mr. Allen!" she shouted. The room immediately became more boisterous.

Ellie joined us shortly thereafter, and I was impressed to see that she alone of the girls was properly dressed, wearing her maid uniform. I wouldn't tell anyone that she had been the neediest of them all with both Stella and me the night before.

"Allen, sir!" she chirped, quickly dashing over and diving at me.

"Whoa there," I replied. "What brought this on?"

Ellie giggled. "I'm just so happy. You too, Big Sis Stella!"

"Eek! E-Ellie?"

I was just thinking that the little angel with her arms around the startled beauty would have made a delightful work of art when I overheard voices arguing in the corridor.

"What do you expect me to do?" Lydia was saying. "You know what he's like. He's as generous as they come."

"We need to put the brakes on that," Caren replied.

"I agree. We should be more careful than ever. Now, have you explained about you-know-what?"

"Don't worry; I've told them. But even if I hadn't, our mom and dad would never get the wrong idea about Allen. Will you be spending the summer in the eastern capital? Not that I want you there."

"Of course! Remember, I ceded you the right to sleep over on weekdays, and I can take it back."

"As his sister, that right belongs solely to me. Outsiders like you should mind their own business."

"M-Me, an 'outsider'?! Where he's concerned?!" After a drawn-out pause, Lydia said, "Well now..."

I'd better stop them before they bring the whole house down.

Just then, there came a tug on my right sleeve, and a voice fraught with emotion whispered in my ear. "I'm truly, truly grateful. I could never have done any of it without you, *Allen*."

What?

Beside me, Stella stuck out her tongue slightly. She was blushing so furiously that even her neck was red. "I've never called a man so close to my age by name before," she informed me.

How charmi— What's this I sense?!

Felicia was recording us with a video orb. How easily influenced could she be?!

Tina and Lynne were still fooling around, while the maid attempted to broker peace between them. I detected an ominous mood in the corridor as well. Wasn't it a little early for this?

"Stella," I said. The smiling noblewoman responded with a look of curiosity. "Duke Walter requested that I tutor you as well. What do you say to that?"

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne instantly froze. They were eighty percent delighted, with the remainder of their reactions given over to other emotions.

"Yes! Please tutor me!" the future Duchess Howard answered immediately and unambiguously. Stella was determined, and as long as she kept advancing one step at a time, she would be able to move forward.

"Now, you'd all better get dressed," I said. "It's time for breakfast. I'll stop the pair in the hallway. Felicia, I'm confiscating that video orb, and please try to resist bad influences."

*

"There," my mother had said. "I'm finished, Stella. You look lovely. That's my little girl!"

"Mother, may I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Father does my hair sometimes, so why am I not supposed to ask any other men to help me with it?"

"That's a good question. Think about it this way: would you like it if any man but your father did *my* hair?"

"...No."

"Exactly!"

I hadn't understood what she'd meant.

My mother had laughed. "Don't worry," she had told me. "You'll understand someday. Getting someone you care for to do your hair is a wonderful feeling. I think so, anyway. I know that you'll meet someone you feel that way about one day."

"I want you or Shelley to do my hair forever and ever!"

For a moment, my mother had fallen silent. Then, she had asked, "Is that so?"

"Mother?"

My mother, Rosa, had been crying. She must have realized that she hadn't much longer to live.

But mother, I really did meet him. I met a magician with moonlight and starlight to illuminate my way in the dark of night. So please, don't worry and watch over me. I'm not Caren, Felicia, Tina, Ellie, Lynne, or Lady Lydia—I'm your daughter, Stella Howard!

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been four months, so long time no see. I've already had two volumes published, and now I've gotten to follow them up with a third. Thank you so much.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've revised about ninety percent of it. What? You feel as though you've read this before? Hah hah hah. How could that be?

When this series was green-lit for publication, I'd already decided that volume one would focus on Tina and volume two on Lydia, but volume three was a blank slate. Still, after what I'd written in the second volume, this one had to be Stella's story. As a result, the student council president, like Caren, got a significant boost in prominence compared to in the web novel, and I expect her presence to keep growing in future volumes. Everything she does is just so adorable.

A certain bespectacled girl has secretly acquired a catchphrase too. I'd very much like to write a side story about her—how does the daily life of the Leinster and Howard maids sound, written from her perspective? Oh, you'd prefer something about Allen and Lydia's past? I see. Well, I think you'll get your wish one of these days if the series continues! I hope I'll get the chance to keep it going that long.

Be that as it may, to those of you who started with volume three, struck by the cover illustration of Stella, don't worry—you haven't made a mistake, although I think that we can all be happier if you pick up volumes one and two while you're at it. After all, boosting the chances that I'll get to publish more volumes will mean more illustrations for you to look at! What? You feel as though you've read *this* before too? You must be imagining it.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

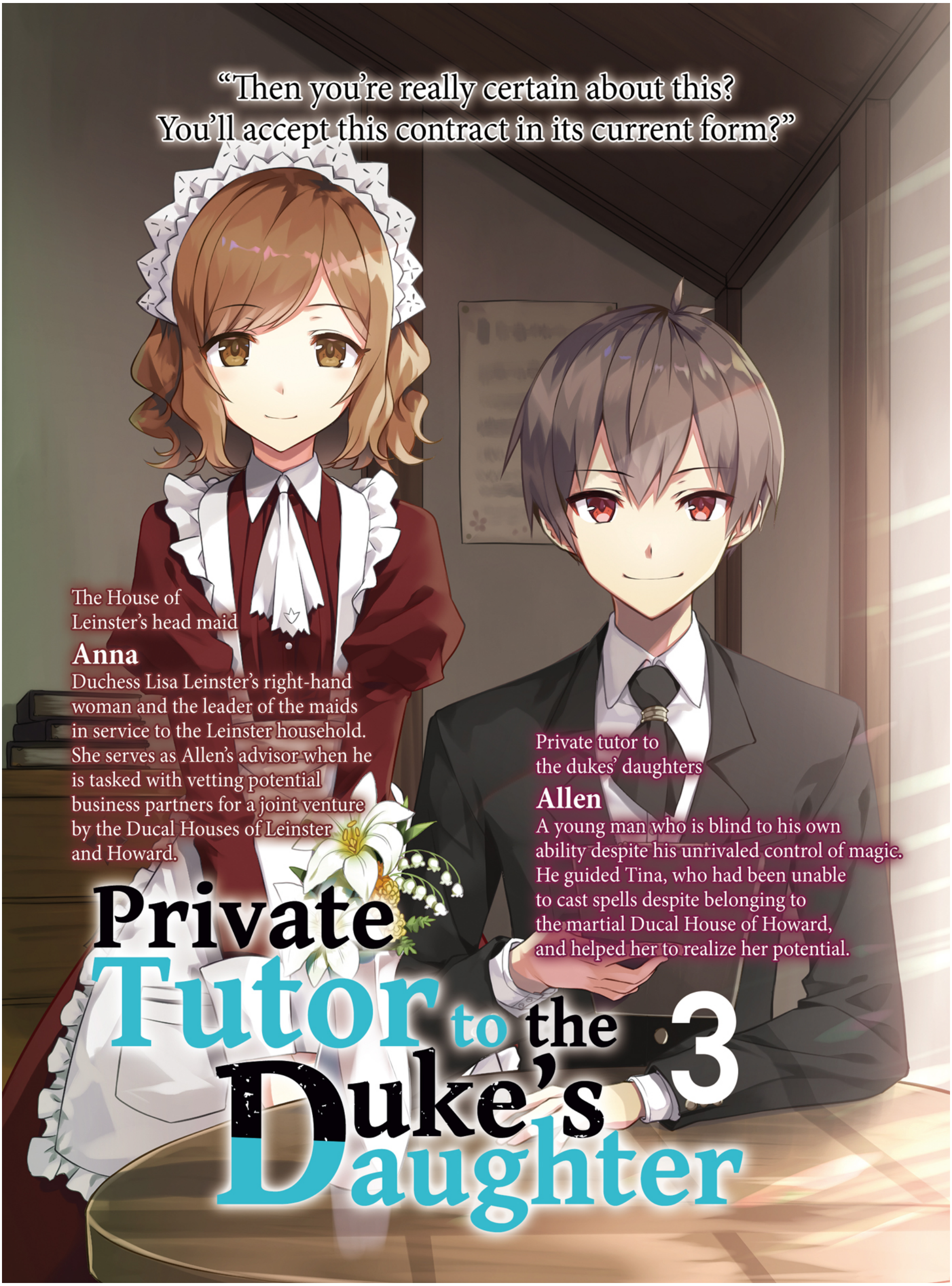
My editor. I'm *deeply* in your debt again this volume. I never expected to catch the flu out of season, but I know it caused you a lot of trouble. I'll do my best to take action quickly and without overdoing it.

The illustrator, cura. Thank you once again for your wonderful drawings. Those summer clothes left me at a loss for words.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I hope to do my best for you while minding my health going forward, especially as I have another series in the works. My online readers can guess what it is. You know; *that* one.

I look forward to our next meeting. The next volume will release in early autumn—it's time to settle a grudge for good!

Riku Nanano



"Then you're really certain about this? You'll accept this contract in its current form?"

The House of
Leinster's head maid

Anna

Duchess Lisa Leinster's right-hand woman and the leader of the maids in service to the Leinster household. She serves as Allen's advisor when he is tasked with vetting potential business partners for a joint venture by the Ducal Houses of Leinster and Howard.

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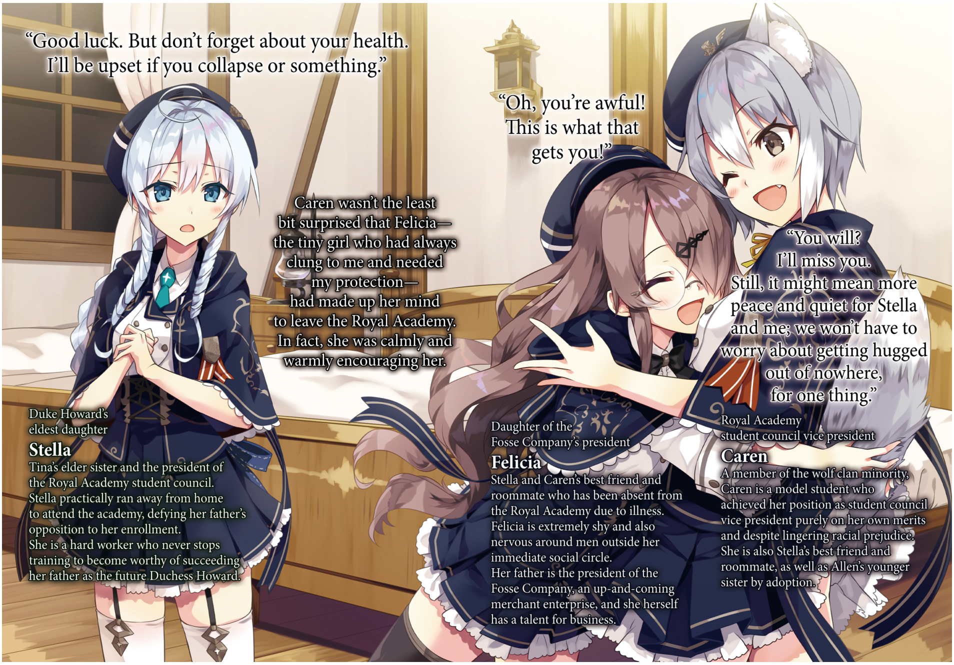
A young man who is blind to his own ability despite his unrivaled control of magic. He guided Tina, who had been unable to cast spells despite belonging to the martial Ducal House of Howard, and helped her to realize her potential.

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter 3



"Good luck. But don't forget about your health. I'll be upset if you collapse or something."

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Tina's elder sister and the president of the Royal Academy student council. Stella practically ran away from home to attend the academy, defying her father's opposition to her enrollment. She is a hard worker who never stops training to become worthy of succeeding her father as the future Duchess Howard.

Caren wasn't the least bit surprised that Felicia—the tiny girl who had always clung to me and needed my protection—had made up her mind to leave the Royal Academy. In fact, she was calmly and warmly encouraging her.

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Stella and Caren's best friend and roommate who has been absent from the Royal Academy due to illness. Felicia is extremely shy and also nervous around men outside her immediate social circle. Her father is the president of the Fosse Company, an up-and-coming merchant enterprise, and she herself has a talent for business.

"You will? I'll miss you. Still, it might mean more peace and quiet for Stella and me; we won't have to worry about getting hugged out of nowhere, for one thing."

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A member of the wolf clan minority, Caren is a model student who achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits and despite lingering racial prejudice. She is also Stella's best friend and roommate, as well as Allen's younger sister by adoption.

"Did you see...?"

"Oh, really?
You're perceptive enough
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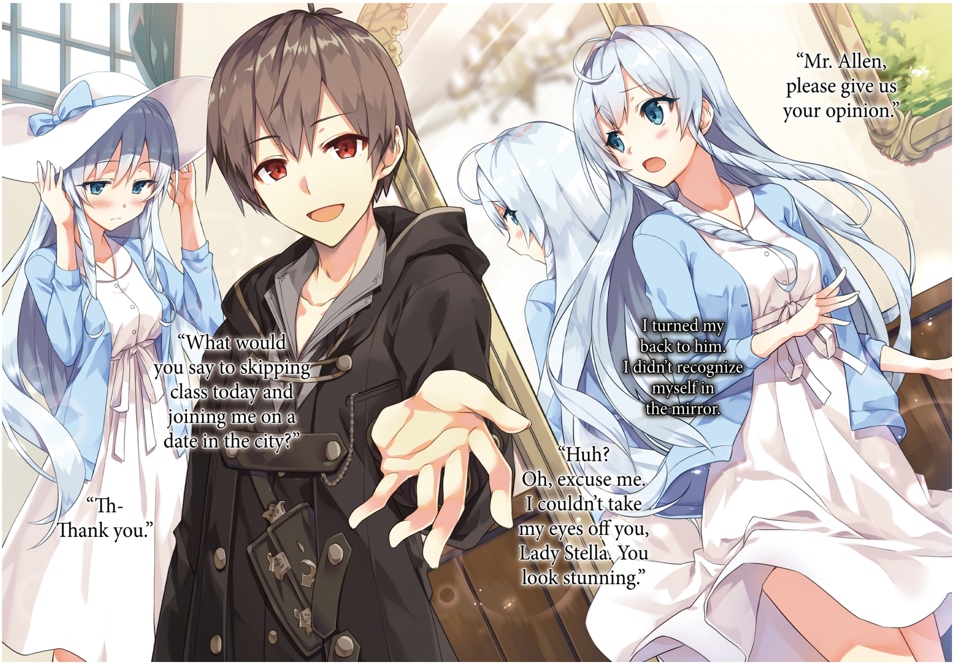
The albatross around Allen's neck ever since they both enrolled in the Royal Academy. Lydia is a flawless noblewoman—brilliant, gorgeous, and the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman. Despite her current freewheeling personality, she displays a jealous side when it comes to Allen.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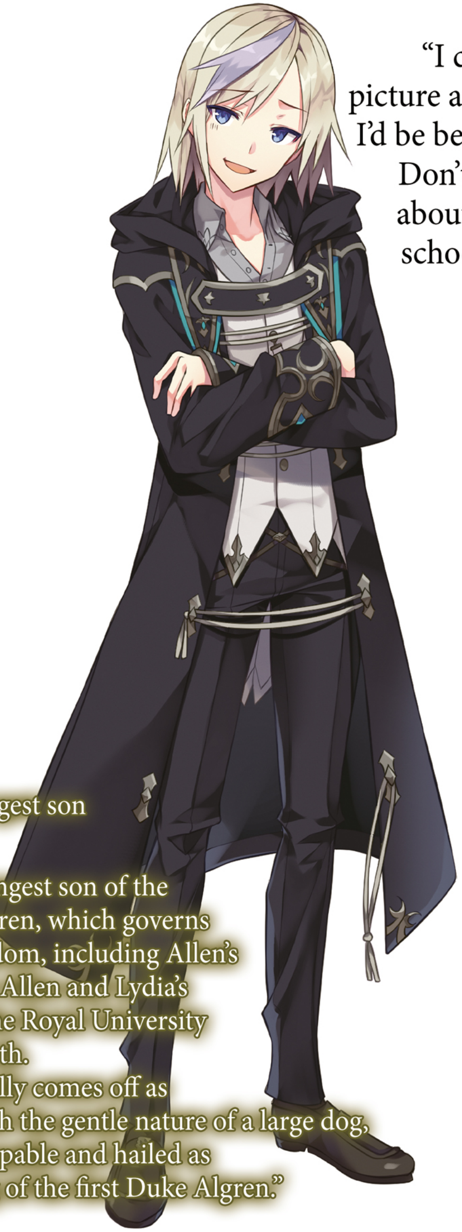

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Gil

The fourth and youngest son of the Ducal House of Algren, which governs the east of the kingdom, including Allen's hometown. Gil was Allen and Lydia's underclassman at the Royal University and adores them both.
Although he normally comes off as a laid-back man with the gentle nature of a large dog, he is surprisingly capable and hailed as "the second coming of the first Duke Algren."

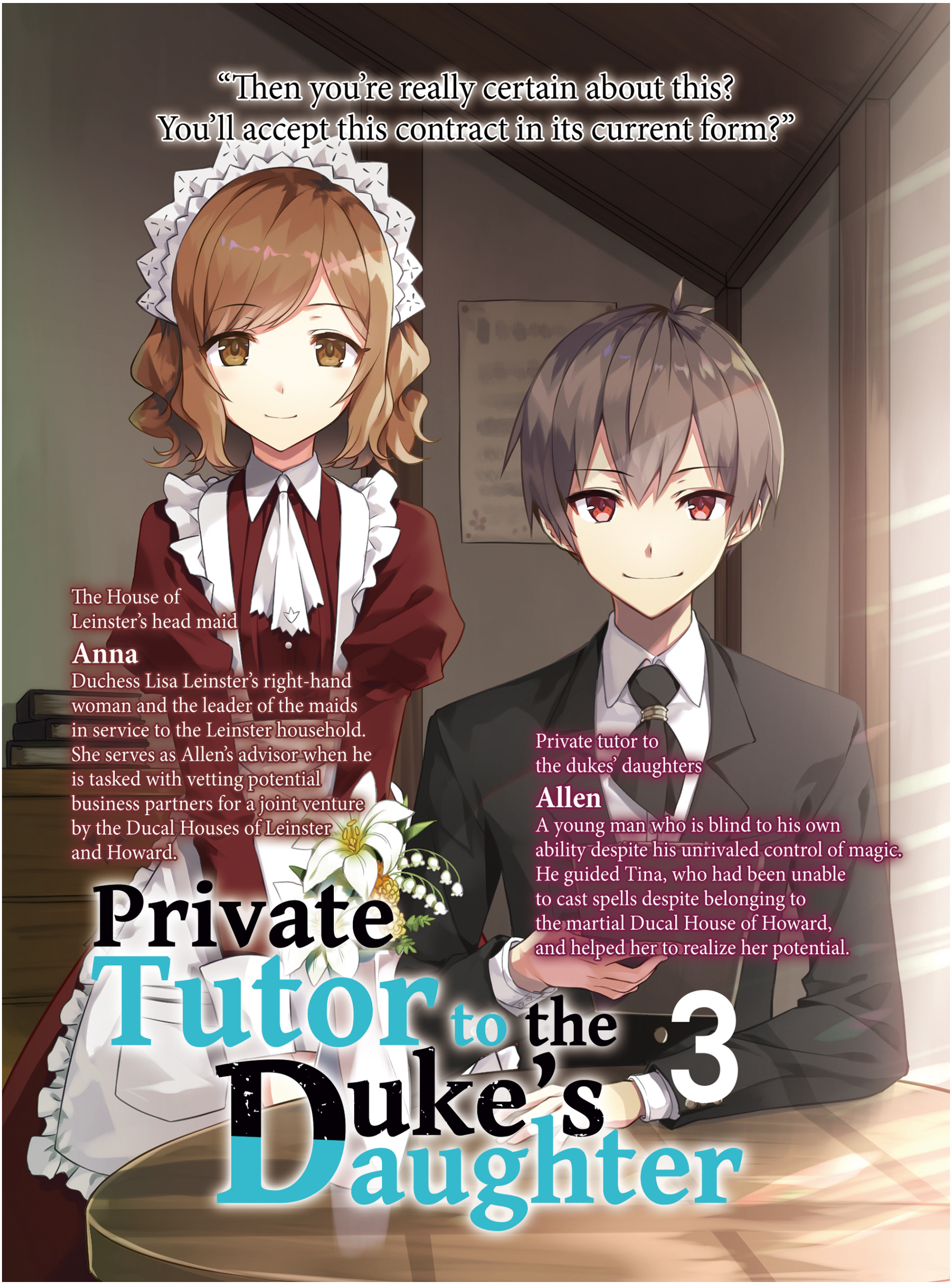
3

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Guiding a Lost Saint with a Magical Revolution



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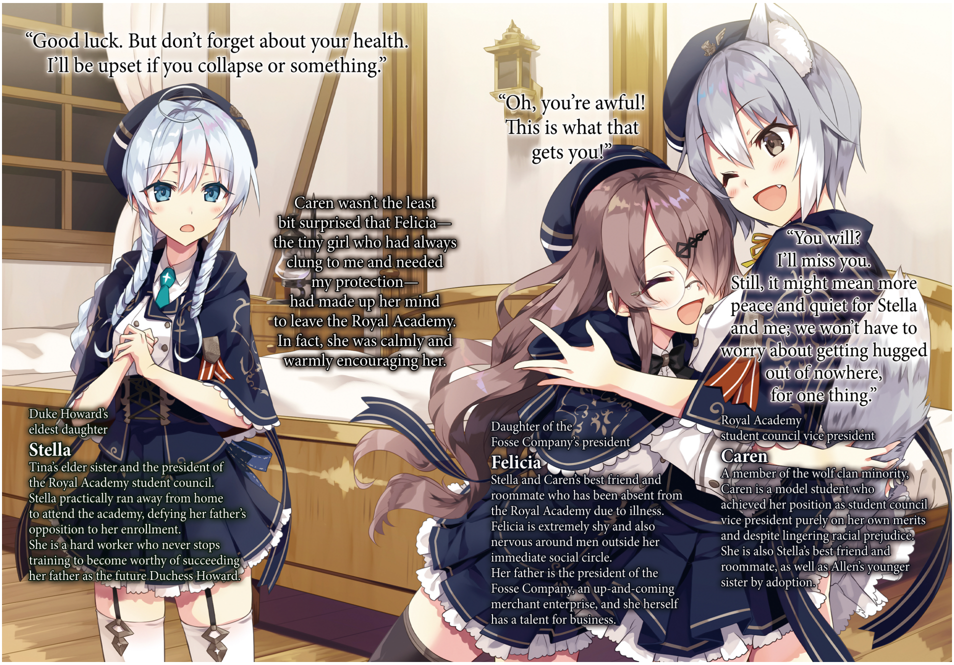

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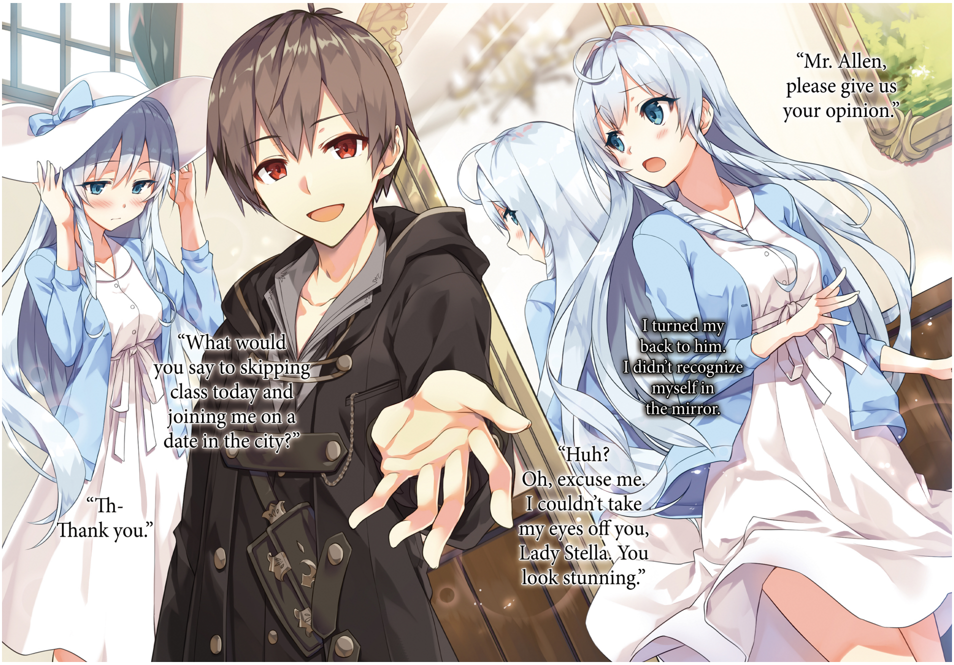
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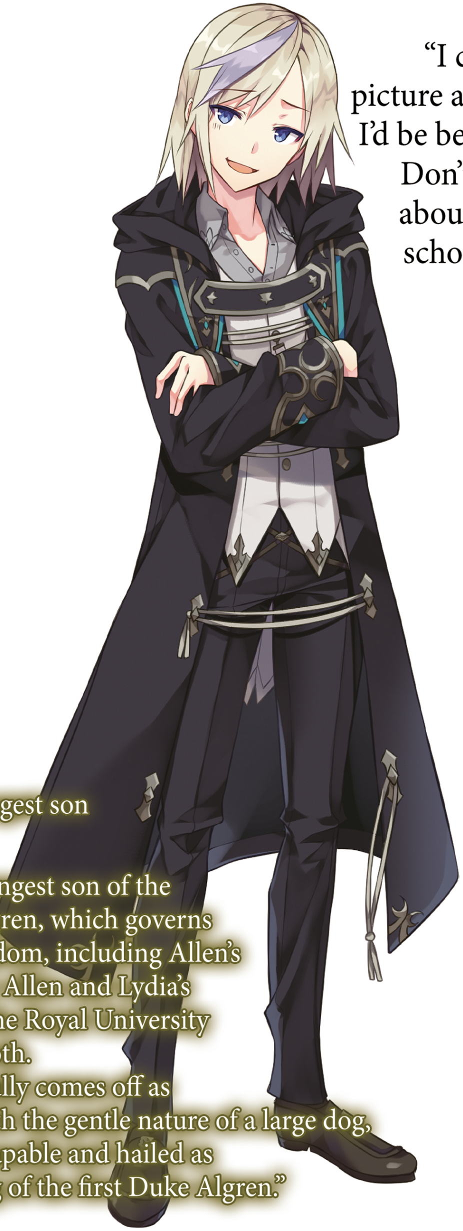

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by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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